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**Naughty but nice**  
Mike Franco  
with the lowdown

NATASHA KISSELL'S STUDIO • PETER HEARD DISSECTION • BOB MORTIMER'S PORTRA

Kasper, *Stay Boy*, acrylic on canvas, 91x91 cm



# Briefs Encountered

Mike Francis's work is as racy as his dialogue. **John Swinfield** reports



## FEATURE: MIKE FRANCIS

Here, then, is a reporter's dream: a candidate bursting with quotable quotes who's fun and earthy and talented with a cracking good tale to tell.

Talking to him is like coming up for air after being smothered under a PR duvet of spin and pretence; if you edit an art magazine it goes with the turf.

He's old enough to have lived a little, loved a lot, upset a few and beguiled even more; he likes a drink or three, enjoys the odd bet and loves women. He is of an increasingly rare species: an unreformed pre-modern man.

An illustrator turned painter, his work is riotously, blessedly un-PC. There is only one way he could grow old: quite disgracefully.

work suggests to them that I'd be younger."

This, then, is Mike Francis, 69 years old going on 25. A painter of realism. His canvases are shiny, glossy, as direct as a smack in the eye. Or are they?

They're often naughty but generally nice. A touch of the Hoppers, perhaps?

Maybe, Ed's one of his heroes; but it takes more than this to do a Hopper. Where's Hopper's melancholic irony, all that teasing sadness, the darkly mysterious?

There is something though: a prickle of unease, a tension, and that's rather Hopperish; a gramme of elusive magic that makes them stick in the mind.

At one level they seem simple; of course,

But why be pettifogging? Let's just relish the work. And as for Hopper, Francis would never pretend to be anything of the sort; he's not one for mad vanities. He's been around, seen things, lived a touch; he's got a measure of his own worth. And how refreshing is that in a universe where affected legions imagine they're grander than they actually are?

So why the giveaway titles? Well, they're a reference to movies and music – more of that in a moment.

Francis likes acrylics. "Once you're an accomplished artist, ahem," he says, smiling in that charmingly self-deprecatory way of his, "you can do anything with them. They dry very quickly and I like that, too."

Of his beach scene *Jasper, Stay Boy* he says: "Ah yes, top shelf. I find girls with dogs sexy. There's a companionship between women and animals that's special. It's different to men; that's more macho; pit bulls, gun dogs.

"I'm accused of being anti-feminist. Nothing is further from the truth. I'm the reverse. I don't like nudes. I like clad women. I like fashion, too. You can see it in my work.

"I hold my hand up to liking the ladies. They've got me into trouble in the past. I was married 20 years. I've been with my partner about 25. I hate the word partner. It's a terrible word. But I'm too old to say girlfriend."

His partner, Barbara, is also a painter. He says his wife was what he calls "literary, good with words. She used to say all artists are élitist. I had to agree with her. In fact, I had to agree with everything she said. I don't want to say anymore or I'll be in trouble again."

He oozes energy and enthusiasm, tripping over his Cockney-ish vowels, scrambling to explain his passion: it's an affliction, an unquenchable obsession for painting, an enjoyable drug without any known cure. Each day he spends hour upon hour painting at his south London home in Eltham, or in his studio close by.

"I'm a Londoner through and through, though my mum was from Cornwall. But I'm also a workaholic. I have a telly in the studio and work there in the evenings. If I'm there in the day the problem is that everybody keeps poppin' in and sayin': 'Do you want a brew?' and all that – you just can't get on. They mean well but it's a f\*\*\*\*\*g nuisance. I mustn't keep swearing. Painters are obsessional. I can't stop. I love art history too.

"It's rough where I live. Muggings,

*Nordic Waves*, acrylic on canvas, 91x91cm



When one day he has to succumb to his age they'll cart him away screaming and shouting and laughing and protesting about the shocking unfairness of it all.

"I was once at a gallery and one old girl said to another while they were looking at my work: 'He's no spring chicken, you know'. I could have throttled them. A lot of people say my

they're not. If they were, for goodness' sake, we'd all be doing them.

The silly titles, though, are a pain; daft names demean good paintings. These don't need any crutches: keep the obvious names and the hint of vulgar narrative for Beryl Cook and McGill's end-of-the pier postcard sauciness.

stabbings, bricks through the window. I like my work to make a social comment. Through it I'm associated with a lighter side. But people who know me know I can be quite serious."

He charges at life, always has, swallowing it down in great greedy gulps. It's in his work: bold, life at full throttle, head-on. "I'll tell you another thing," he says, his conversation racing. "I've always liked the horses, the gee gees. Ladies and horses. I can't help it, I just love 'em. I've done quite a lot of drawings of people placing bets in bookies. Excuses!

"Anyway, there's a young lad now behind the counter in the betting shop. He's got a gift. When he draws he's got a really lovely line. So I told him: 'Get out there; do something with it'. I don't think he will. He prefers to just sit there moaning about how rotten his job is. Things have changed; youngsters today seem bored to tears. You can't squander talent. It's a crime."

An only child, he grew up in Mitcham, Surrey, a dormitory for London. "Ordinary little suburban house." His mum was Tess, his dad Harry, a proofreader on the long-defunct, still lamented, *News Chronicle*. "Or a corrector of the Press as he liked to put it."

*Don't Squeeze Me Plums, Love,*  
oil on paper, 76x102cm



**" I'M ACCUSED OF BEING ANTI-FEMINIST. NOTHING IS FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH. I'M THE REVERSE. I DON'T LIKE NUDES. I LIKE CLAD WOMEN. I LIKE FASHION. YOU CAN SEE IT IN MY WORK"**

He visited Fleet Street with his dad. "Exciting, big presses, noise, people. It's a lost world."

Leaving school at 15, he worked as a porter in the old Covent Garden. He'd been offered a place at Sutton art school near his home. "But you had to pay money in those days. Dad said I should get a proper f\*\*\*\*\*g job."

He'd drawn since he was nine. "A friend said I should try for a job in a studio. I got one in Soho. I was just a messenger for four years; and there I was thinking they'd turn me into a proper bloody artist. Some hope. When I was 18 I joined the army for National Service."

But Her Majesty obliged him to do a touch longer than the compulsory two years.

"Yeah, typical bloody artist. Always p\*\*\*\*\*d. Always in trouble. Got put away, in the nick, the glass house. Bit of a bad lad, I s'pose."

In the army he was the camp signwriter.

"Not the *camp* signwriter. Do you mind? But the RSM probably thought so. He'd bawl at me: 'Picasso!' I used to have to paint six-foot bloody pictures of army badges. Imagine that."

"When I came out I went back to the studio and stayed 12 years. Wonderful grounding."

*A Room With a View and You,*  
acrylic on canvas, 102x152cm



Learned everything. Everybody could draw and paint. It was all hand-crafted. Not too many computers like today. It was a hard slog.

"Six weeks at a stretch painting matchboxes, learning about bloody perspective! Those years in a commercial studio taught you discipline. It was hard, but a good background."

This was his apprenticeship. He learned draftsmanship, composition, colour, line, how to tell a visual story, working to tight deadlines; a personal discipline essential to success.

It wasn't all matchboxes. Rigorously trained and by now hugely versatile, in double-quick time he was turning out work on everything from Kit-Kat labels to cinema posters. It was in the latter he began making his name.

A major break came in 1972: the National Gallery held a poster competition marking its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. "I did something which was a bit Norman Rockwellish featuring my daughter Louise and bunged it in. And to my surprise and pleasure it won. I picked up £850, enough in those days to go independent."

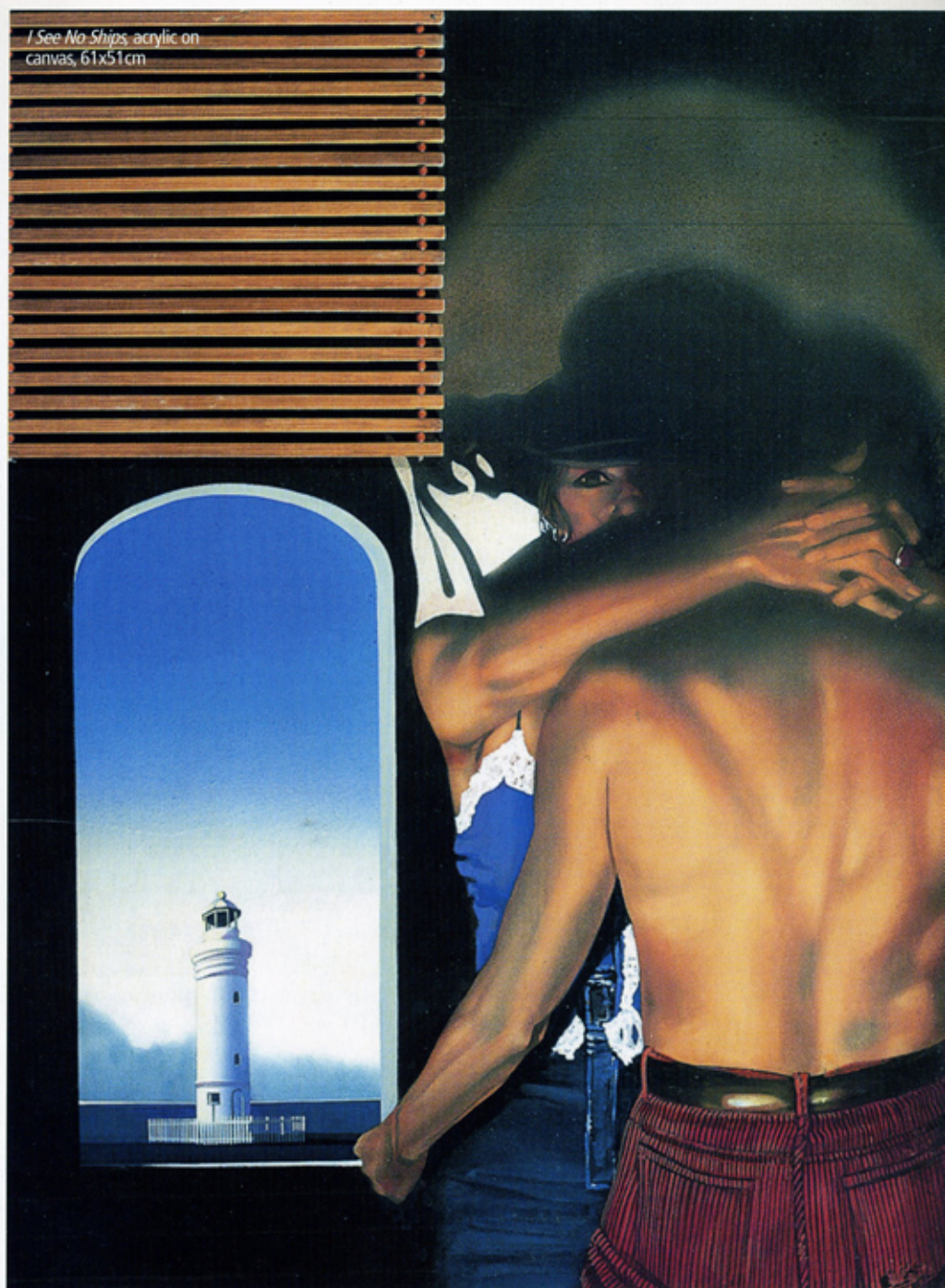
Since then he has worked with several galleries, bringing to each his own inimitable style. "A gallery in Wimbledon was run by a colonel-type who said my work looked like 'British Rail posters and we don't want tits and bums in Wimbledon'. I felt like saluting him." As well as Edward Hopper and the American illustrator Norman Rockwell, he also admires the work of the American photorealistic painter and photographer Chuck Close.

He recently joined Messum's gallery. David Messum is one of the shrewdest of the West End dealers. "When he and his partner came to my place to see my work they thought they'd stay a minute or two. Three hours later, after I've told 'em a few stories and they were a bit the worse for a drink or two, they said it was one of the best times they'd spent with a painter. I asked David why he wanted my stuff. He said 'I sometimes get fed up with bloody landscapes. We need something with oomph!'"

From turning out film posters – he's in a new book, *British Film Posters* (reviewed April A&J 247) – Francis is now highly collectable.

His pictures sell for £3000-£12,000. He's in danger of being adopted by the celeb-set, his work having been bought by Robbie Williams and Jerry Hall. But it'll take more than a warbler and a model to stifle the critics: posters not art, they'll say; brassy, demeaning, top-shelf.

Messum's, like any gallery worth its margins, can turn on the hyperbole: "His work



*I See No Ships*, acrylic on canvas, 61x51cm

**"SIX WEEKS AT A TIME PAINTING MATCHBOXES, LEARNING ABOUT BLOODY PERSPECTIVE. THOSE YEARS IN A COMMERCIAL STUDIO TAUGHT YOU DISCIPLINE. HARD, BUT A GOOD BACKGROUND"**

combines the techniques of the Old Masters – hyper-realistic and somehow hidden."

Maybe 'Old Master' is a bit over the top. But one of the rather purpleish lines in the gallery puff-piece is perhaps indisputable: "There is a complex and erotic charge..."

For all his colourful language – what a

euphemism – and ripping yarns – how polite Francis holds up a sly and witty mirror. His work has an American feel: look at his three American influences. And yes, of course it's erotic, posterish and bold. And why ever not?

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