

**C**HAMPAGNE-quaffing sessions with Francis Bacon, Paris shows, and £10,000 price tags, Mike Francis has come a long way from his days as a studio apprentice, painstakingly drawing the torn paper and crinkled silver of half-opened KitKat's to earn his keep.

Take a walk around the new exhibition of his work at Mayfair's Messum's gallery and you will be mesmerised.

The glossy West End streetscapes, a surreal amalgam of 1950s characters and present-day backdrops are simultaneously unworldly yet mundanely familiar.

Soho is ordinarily a dream world, but Francis provides a passage into a hazy hinterland that us mere mortals just don't see.

Ghosts from another time reawakened on canvas. Put simply, Mike Francis is photorealism – he is the man and the movement.

As he tells us, however, it wasn't always this way.

A mind-numbing job as a porter and two years doing his National Service left the 21-year-old underwhelmed with life. So he followed his nose and passion. But in

# Portrait of the artist over time

**Artists used to do it because they loved the work. Now people only do what sells, now it's all money, money, money, says Mike Francis**

an incestuous 1950s art world ruled by the "knobs and snobs" of Soho, a south London boy with a "funny accent", and no formal training was not exactly over-brimming with prospects.

"Art has always been difficult to break into but back then it was ridiculous," says Mike. "It was all so political. I used to try and hawk my work around but I never got past the door because they would ask what school I went to or they wouldn't like my accent. It was so snooty. In many ways it hasn't changed that much."

It didn't help that Francis may as well have been giving the middle finger to the art fraternity who, at the time, were more interested in the past masters and conservative pastoralism than "paintings that

looked like photos".

"People used to say, what's the point in a painting that looks like a photo," said Mike.

"No one was doing what I was doing. They preferred to paint with mud. They just didn't get it."

Eventually someone had the foresight to give him a chance and display his works, although he had to keep slaving away in the studio in Denman Street, where he ended up staying for 11 years.

But it wasn't the money that Mike was interested in, it was the excitement. Something Mike says has been lost from the industry.

"Now it's all money, money, money," laments Mike.

"Back then Soho was packed with artists and related trades that have long since vanished. We all used to hang out, get



Ghosts from another time, reawakened on canvas – Mike Francis at work

pissed. It was such a laugh. Profits used to be split between artists, so if someone was having a tough time shifting stuff they would still get by. People used to do it because they loved the work. Now people only do what sells. Its very calculated.

"Now no one knows each other. All the camaraderie has gone."

A damning estimation. So if art has changed, what about his beloved Soho.

Having worked in the area for 20 years, Mike still takes the train up once week.

Armed with a camera and paint brush, he sets to work on the streets.

"I can't let it go. I loved the area. I still do. It makes me feel alive and rejuvenated. Although I do think it has lost its way a bit. I wouldn't go as far as saying its completely

lost its soul but it's in dangerous territory."

Mike's love for the people of Soho comes across in his work.

From street poets to buskers, honest souls to city gals all are treated with a come one, come all attitude, apparently in short supply today.

Although at the time not everyone shared his sympathy.

"I remember people running into the gallery and throwing stones at my paintings because they didn't like me painting prostitutes," said Mike mischievously. They wanted to crucify me. We had people camped outside the gallery saying I was an anti-feminist. It was complete rubbish and we used to play on it. Really I was just telling stories."

And that's what he has done ever since. "I wake up every day and paint. I don't make much money but it's the best job in the world."

**JAMIE WELHAM**

Recent works – Mike Francis is at Messum's, 8 Cork Street, W1, until July 12 – See Exhibitions, page 14