Deryk Houston – It's Easy to Make a Ghost - an artist's journey creating art and understanding war

"Barr of Spotts" by Deryk Houston watercolour 10"X12'

Chapter 1 White as snow

Hundred of blackbirds scattered in fear as the jagged arc of lightning sizzled and cracked through the rain, into the soft belly of the fertile landscape. The fragile scene, painted on glass, shattered immediately, and transformed into the image of a pregnant cow dragging my homemade winter sled over the summer grass. That dream was interrupted, when a giant hedgehog started to rub its shoulders on the outside walls of our tiny cottage.

I woke and sat up in my bed, still hearing the peculiar scratching sound as my eyes focused briefly on the beauty of the dust, hanging like stars in the honey-coloured light. At five years old, I thought I knew most of the sounds and smells of a farm, but this was a mystery that just didn't feel right. Curiosity tugged my little toes out of bed and pushed me sleepily through the front door into the bright light, only to discover that there was no hedgehog of any kind in sight.

Instead, it was my dad, Jack, working away thoughtfully, as he rubbed a large bristly paintbrush over the stone walls of our tiny cottage. The oversized brush released a milky solution onto the rough surface which dried quickly into a solid, protective coating as white as snow.

Whitewash is a thin, translucent mixture, of lime, salt and water and as he brushed the walls with it, the whitewash scattered in every direction leaving white splatters all over the dark green grass. Jack intended to get a lot of work done that day, but he didn't mind taking the time to explain to me that in a week or two the grass would be back to normal, before grabbing his bucket and brush and getting back to his work.

Meanwhile, I sought the companionship of a large flat rock that protruded through the grass in the surrounding field. It provided me with the high ground, a vantage point, out of Jacks way, as my mind soaked up another of those endless summer days only experienced in childhood. The soft steady sound of the bristles scrubbing over the walls, provided a gentle background sound to the Robbins who were talking among themselves, as if they also appreciated the magic taking place.

Later in the afternoon, I caught sight of the red glow of a cigarette in the darkness of the attached coal shed, and I went over to find Jack shifting his skinny weight on a dusty bag of coal, while he carefully stirred a large barrel of emerald, green paint. The thick liquid burst into life under the shaft of a single beam of sunlight entering the small, rusty skylight above. The heavy, intoxicating scent of linseed oil and turpentine, soaked into every cobweb.

Years later, as an artist, I still take comfort in the sound my brush makes as it spreads the pigments of colour over my canvas, and curiosity still pulls me out of my bed as I try to understand a world that is under constant stress.

Our house rested like a white dove in the center of a stunning patchwork of rolling green fields in the southwest of Scotland, and the entire area was occupied by milk cows, sheep, rabbits, lambs and hedgehogs. The simple rooms were filled with the warmth of sunlight and the scent of fresh cut hay, which flowed through the small, deeply set windows in the thick stone walls.

The grey slate roof protected us from the heaviest rain and dampened the sound of the darkest thunder.

An emerald, green, unlocked front door, had welcomed visitors for an untold number of years, long before our family arrived. There was no road or path leading down to the cottage from the main Barr of Spotts farmhouse, leaving you were on your own to pick your way down through the field, wherever the least amount of mud and cow pies lay in wait.

The cottage provided a near idyllic home for my mom and dad and my three siblings, Jackie, Jean and Frank. We called our dad, Jack, because his name was Jack. We called our mom, mom, because she was our mom.

They rented the cottage and part of Jack's responsibilities, included mending stone dykes, helping with the hay, hauling the sheep in and out of deep baths of chemical dip in preparation for shearing. He also went up and down the long rows of crops in the fields with a handheld hoe. I can remember watching him working in line with several other men cutting a large hay field with scythes, until tractors appeared on our farm shortly after that. Some farmers didn't like the changes, and there was a fair argument to be made that you can't put two tractors in the barn and expect to get a new tractor.

Jack's main income was earned by working at the abattoir in the nearby town of Castle Douglas and his clothes smelled of dried blood, sweat and cigarette smoke.

He had recently come through the second world war, and like most men from that era, I would guess he carried the weight of that everywhere he went. Jack was a good dad and was not afraid of a hard day's work.

When I was old enough, I accompanied my brothers and sister over the wet fields, down to the local village of Springholm to catch a bus to school. Sometimes we would get distracted and miss the bus when we couldn't resist the attraction of a recently flooded field. Other times we might have been busy trying to scare away the crows that were pecking the eyes out of a sheep lying on it's back in distress. If we missed the bus, we knew to wave down a lorry driver and he would stop and pick us up. If it was raining hard enough, some drivers would even take us right to the main gate of the school. It was a different era.

At school lunch break we sometimes walked over to the nearby slaughterhouse and watch our dad at work, in the hope that we might scrounge a few pennies for candies.

A stones throw from the main entrance, there was a long concrete trench, exposed to the hot sun, filled with the bloated guts and scraps that even failed the low standard set for sausages.

The putrid stench, and the deep red blood, soaked into our minds, as much as it soaked into our clothes.

We watched the entire process as Jack butchered the farm animals. Killing livestock was gruesome work, but necessary at the time, and we would stand there in our dirty black wellingtons, stunned at the sight of how much blood flowed out of an animal as it shuddered and fought its delusional battle to hold onto life.

The sheep were slaughtered differently from the cows, and the practice at that time, in that abattoir, was to place the sheep on their backs with their feet tied as they lay on a long, waist high, ladder like shelf. When my brother Jackie was old enough to work there, one of his first grim tasks was to go down the row and cut the throats of the tied sheep. The thick, warm blood would spurt and drain into a blood gutter just under their necks and that was directed into a forty-five-gallon drum where it would be saved for black pudding sausages and other delicious breakfast treats. Nothing much was wasted.

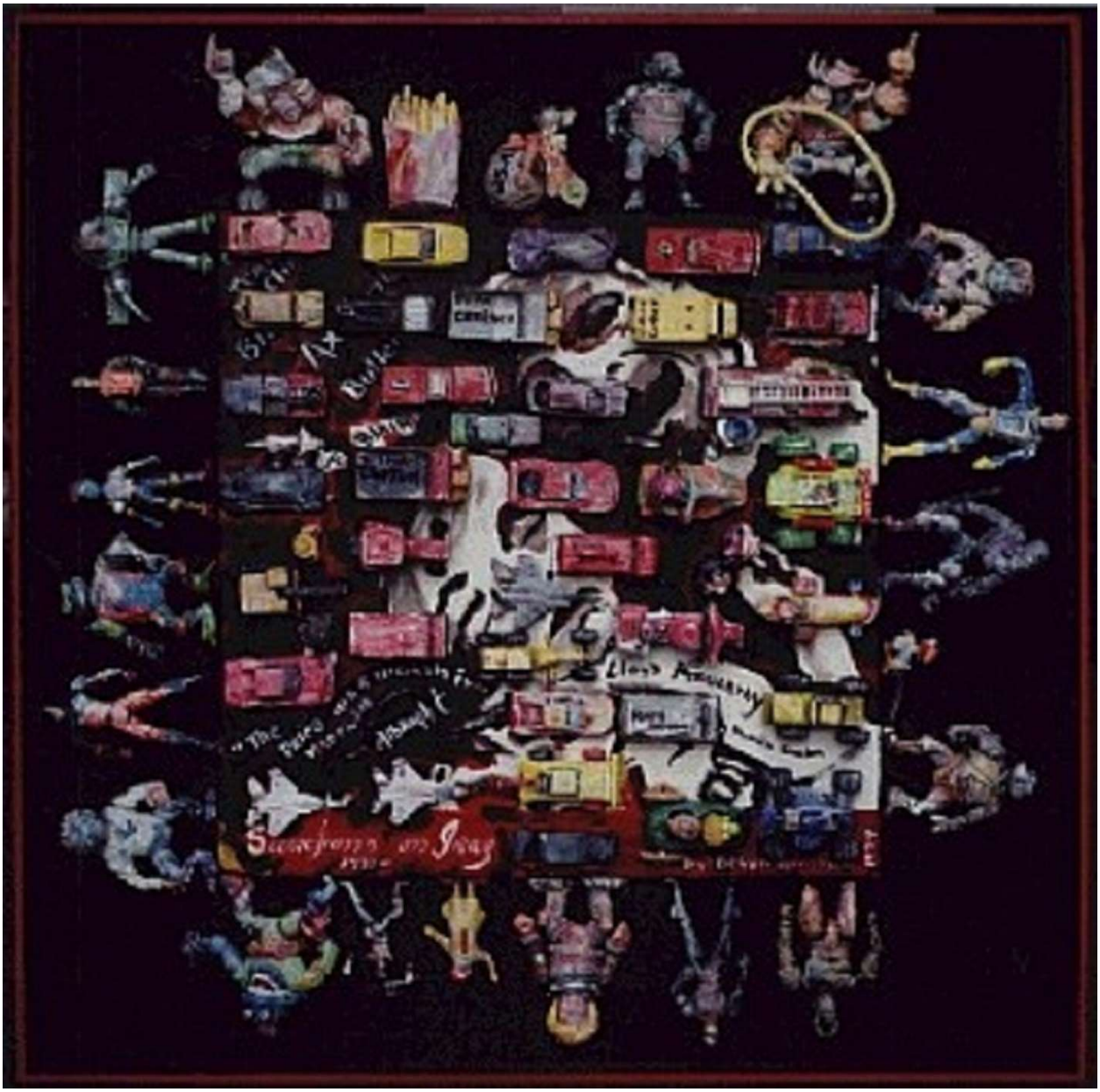
We watched as one of the sheep made a valiant attempt to escape the fate of its comrades, as it bolted in desperation, slipping, sliding, bobbing and weaving its way across the battlefield like floor, which was splattered in pools of clotted blood, shards of bone, chunks of meat and feces. A red-faced fat butcher, covered in blood, dodged and danced between the hanging meat racks as he followed in pursuit, with several knives swinging in unison from his large waist band, doing his best to sink his claws into his prisoner's back, before it escaped. We discreetly attempted to move closer together to block the butcher's path, hopefully giving the sheep a chance, but it merely postponed the inevitable.

The smell of death, the constant sharpening sound of the knives, the terror, the bulging eyes of the animals, stand out most in my memory.

As children, we never thought much of it or how things might be any different. For that reason, we didn't find it unusual the day we watched my cousin's mother swing a long-handled axe into the severed head of a sheep on her kitchen floor. The only thing we noticed as peculiar, was that she was obviously wearing her husband's oversized army boots as she pinned the head to the floor with her feet. Her goal was to break the skull open and scoop out the prized brains for that night's dinner.

Every time she smacked the detached head with her axe, it bolted off, skittering across the bare concrete, as if it was desperately searching for a dark corner to hide away from the crazy woman in army boots.

Those of us who buy our meat wrapped in plastic on a Styrofoam tray, might think that this is a bit barbaric, because in todays world, we prefer a sanitized version of reality, with the fingerprints wiped off the scene of the crime.



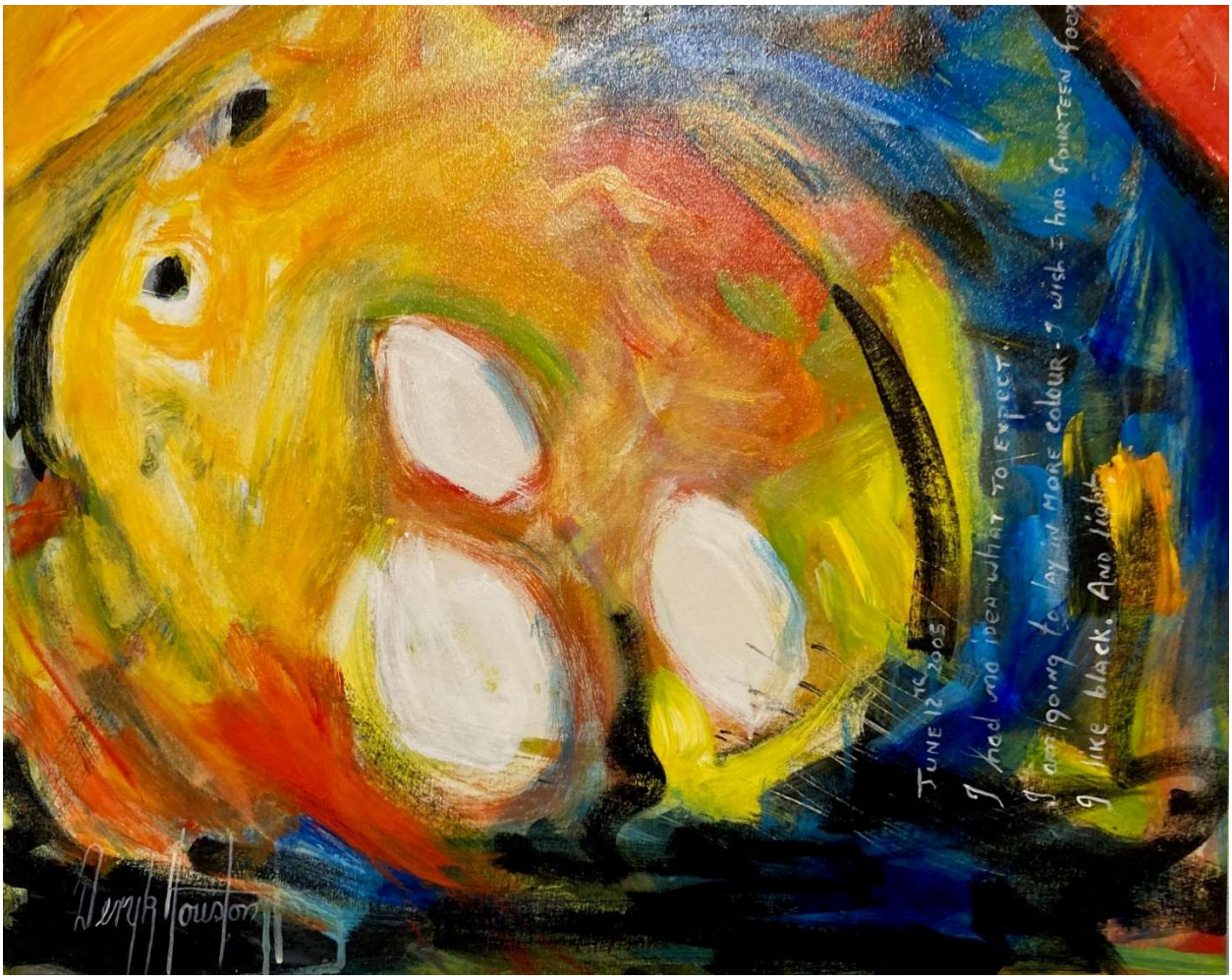
These graphic descriptions are nothing compared to what we do to men, women and children in wars that have gone on since mankind lived in caves.

When we put gas in our car, most of us don't think twice about the death and the misery that secured our supply of gas, or the rare earths for our EV's.

With childhood memories soaked in blood scenes, it is no surprise that years later, the phrase, "It is easy to make a Ghost" caught my attention and I became interested in weaving the theme of peace and war into my art.

My brothers, Jackie, Frank and my sister Jean and I spent every moment of our free days roaming around the vast fields surrounding our cottage. There was no greater pleasure and

mystery than finding a jet-black feather in the grass, and yet it stirred a sadness deep inside me, because it seemed such a waste to discard and lose something so perfect and precious.



“Eggs” by Deryk Houston 24”X30” acrylic on canvas

My chore was to feed the chickens and gather their eggs.

I also loved to discover Robins’ nests in the surrounding hedgerows. It was a precious moment when my fingers would reach up into the nest and feel the warmth of the sky-blue eggs. We would make a trail through the tall hay in the fields and sometimes a curlew would leap in panic from its nest, making it easy for us to find her spotted, earth-coloured eggs. I don’t know how old I was at that time, but I do know that I could barely see over the height of the hay, and even at that age, I had a sense that I was holding a miracle in my hands.

For lunch, we might hide behind a stone dyke and wait for the farmer on his tractor to throw turnips off the open trailer onto the grass for the sheep. After his tractor rumbled off, we would grab a turnip each and break it up by smashing it against the dike wall and wolf it down raw.

Life surrounded us and we explored it from every angle. I also spent a lot of time by myself in the fields when everyone else was off to school. I never felt lonely or bored.

In the summer we would take discarded, tractor inner tubes hanging on the wall of the grain shed at the main farmhouse, and head over the hill to the nearby Roman's bridge that straddled a small stream. My older brother Jackie would sometimes fish for trout, while we swam and filled our tummies with sandwiches made from mom's home-made bread and jam.

We once broke overhanging sods from the bank of the river and created a dam across the stream so that we would have a deeper pool to swim in.

I don't know what the fish thought of that, but I can guess what my dad thought as he fished quite a bit further downstream and watched in disbelief as the water stopped flowing. Against all odds, he somehow figured out that we were the likely culprits.

Jackie was the oldest, by six years, and he looked after me as an older brother might. I was the youngest and he took an interest in teaching me how to draw and paint the surrounding oak trees or the old roman bridge. Sometimes he would include a fisherman with a hat in the scene. The perspective in the drawing might have been a bit odd, but it didn't matter.

"The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance" – Aristotle.

The paintings and drawings helped secure the memory of those day and others like it. There was also the unfamiliar scent of the pigments and the wet paper that I loved.

We often climbed into the huge arms of the large oak trees that dotted the fields by wiggling our arms and legs up the massive trunk. To a child it was scary and dangerous, but we achieved a sense of overwhelming safety when the nest like crux of the first main branches were reached. The trees felt alive and solid, and it was always a shock to us when a storm would blow one of our mighty oaks over because we thought they were strong, and invincible.

We spent a lot of our time roaming the hill that rose up behind the back of our cottage. The distant views from the top were spectacular, but like most children, my view of the world was focused on what was immediately in front of me. These were the rabbits, the black feathers, the eggs, and the love for my mom's cooking which won over everything else, unless it had onions in it.

My mom made everything. We had electricity and water and eventually got a TV, but we never had a fridge. Our power ran on coins fed into a black meter bolted near the ceiling in the kitchen, and so during a TV show, such as, Perry Mason, if the meter ran out at the most crucial part of the show, as it always seemed to be the case, there was always a mad scramble to find some coins that might be lost in the couch or in my dads' pockets on the floor.

One day, I watched the blue teacup drop from my mom's hands into the kitchen sink with a crash. My eyes focused on the beautiful cup as it dropped in slow motion. It featured a woman in a long dress, painted in ultramarine blue, her hand reaching up to a little bird soaring into the sky. As the teacup and the blue woman broke into pieces, my moms ridged body fell straight backwards like an oak tree blown over in the wind. There was nothing I could do but watch, as she went into her convulsions. She had epilepsy. I have no idea what went through my mind other than I had seen her having seizures before and I had every reason to believe that she would be all right in time. I was just a little boy, not even in school yet, and no one was home, but I remember to this day, the sound of the back of her head hitting the cruel concrete floor.

Despite the difficulties with her health, mom always filled our lives with love and laughter. One day the cows had broken into the main garden, and she was trying to stop them from getting tangled up in her white bed sheets waving on the clothesline. One of the cows stepped backwards, stepping on her foot, causing her to hop around on her other good foot while shouting at the cows as she took comfort on the front step of the house. Unfortunately, she had sat down on a bee and all hell broke loose, as you can imagine, and she found new strength and purpose to push and shove the last few cows out of the garden and attend to her lost pride.

My dad brought home lots of meat from the slaughterhouse, and he also trapped rabbits in the surrounding fields which mom would make into soups and stews. The house was filled with the smell of fresh bread, pancakes, scones, trifles and Scotch broth. When we went blackberry picking, we threw more berries at each other than we had in our pots at the end of the day, but mom always managed to make ample jars of jam with what was gathered. The scent of the rich, sweet, hot, sticky blackberry jam cooking in the big pot is still locked in my brain.

Once the jam was made and placed into the clean jars, the top of the jam was sealed with melted wax. We only had a cool pantry to serve as a fridge, and it was not uncommon to find mould growing on top of a left-over pot of stew or a jar of jam, which we would naturally scrape off before eating. My sister Jean's cat would sometimes leap and push the outside window inwards, and get into the pantry and lick the butter, leaving its rough tongue marks all over the yellow block.

The house was warmed by a small, free standing coal fireplace in the living room. There were pipes in the back of the fireplace and those led to a large brass hot water tank that hung proudly on the wall behind my mom's big chair in the living room. It was the main source of hot water, and we kept the tank polished with Brasso, like a treasured piece of sculpture. There were also small, rarely used fireplaces in each of the two bedrooms. Sometimes, when money for coal was scarce, my brother Jackie and my dad Jack would walk along the railway line in the dark with flashlights and gather the valuable chunks of coal that had fallen off the trains. Sometimes we would roam around the fields and collect broken branches, but coal provided the best main source of heat, and the fire would warm up the thick stone walls. The living room was cozy, but the back bedrooms were still very cold on winter nights, and we all shivered under the blankets,

as we clutched our hot water bottles, until we fell asleep. In the coldest winter days, I remember climbing along the narrow hallway with our bare feet placed on each side of the walls, so that our toes didn't get bitten by jack frost on the frozen concrete floor. The four of us slept in the one tiny bedroom. Mom and Jack slept in the other adjacent bedroom where there was barely room for their bed. Cows pushed our bedroom window open more than once with their rubbery noses as they bellowed their version of "good morning", leaving a big cloud of steam from their hot breath hanging in the cold morning air.

My daughter "Amy" acrylic painting by Deryk Houston 24"X30"

At the head of my bed, I created an entire wall of pictures that I had cut out of magazines that mom received once a month. I'd stand excitedly on the big stone in the rain, looking out for the postman, watching him as he clambered over the stone dykes and hiked across the sodden fields, cursing the mud, the weather and the cow shite, delivering the mail to the main farms and to the single cottages in the fields like ours.

The pictures in the magazine would feature various scenes of fertile landscapes in crisp morning light, with deep contrasting shadows, and intense, succulent, colours.

Throughout the years, I have been invited into schools to give talks to the children about art, I always ask them “Are there any artists here”. Most of the children put their hands up without hesitation, and yet, if I ask the same question to a room full of adults, only a few will put their hands up and most will do so reluctantly. The thought that we are all artists somehow get’s beaten out of us as we grow older. At least in our western culture.

One afternoon, in the depth of winter, the snowflakes fluttered down around us creating a white silence around us we explored the frozen landscape. Our urge to build a snow sled, was as strong as that of a bird driven to build a nest in the spring. The need to create art holds the same kind of urgency.

We searched and found a corrugated sheet of metal from one of the old barns and bent one end up and tied some string to help drag it back up the hill.

In the summer we made our own bows and arrows and notched and fitted black feathers into the arrows and shaped a piece of sharp slate for the arrowhead. We created and innovated to find solutions for things that we needed. We used whatever was around us. We had no tools and no money. If we needed a hole drilled in the wood for a go cart, then we would create the hole with a burning stick. It was a slow process, but it taught me perseverance and the will to stick to something like a bulldog.

The burning process created the hole and hardened it at the same time. We would search for wheels of old baby carriages at the village dump.

Improvisation helped me later with my art because it built confidence that a solution could be found one way or another. We learned to divide a problem up into smaller pieces. It is how my son Samuel and I built a twenty-two-foot, stainless steel sculpture in a fourteen-foot shed

I look back on those early childhood years with attachment because of the total abandon and freedom we had.