

Stephen Farthing is the second RA to exhibit in the Artists' Laboratory series which focuses on the working methods of Academicians. He tells *Paul Bonaventura* how he brings together painting, drawing and text in his work

# A word about painting

**Paul Bonaventura** The Artists' Laboratory programme of exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts has been established to give Academicians an opportunity to explore new ideas in showing their work. How has this affected the way in which you have gone about conceiving of the current show?

**Stephen Farthing** Most of my exhibitions in the past have been rather like books. To me, there is this sense that each picture is like a chapter in a book, and they come together in the show to make a book. That is the way I have thought about all my exhibitions, except the retrospectives, which function like three or four books on a shelf. This exhibition is completely different in that I have restricted it to pieces that make some connection between painting and writing. I have cherry-picked not so much the best of my work over the past six years, as I would normally, but the work that brings together painting, drawing and text.

The other major difference with this show is that some of the exhibits are preparatory studies, which never turned into paintings, and many of the exhibits are drawings. I would not usually show as many drawings with so few paintings so I'm exposing the working methods, providing visitors with an opportunity to get closer to what goes on in the studio.

**PB** The exhibition is called 'The Back Story'. How did you arrive at this title?

**SF** One day, while I was drawing, I wrote 'The Back Story' backwards on a piece of paper. For some time I had been plotting a painting that had mirror writing on it, but it wasn't until I made this drawing that the idea took off. I suppose part of the thinking came from my realisation that a lot of painters write on the back of their canvases, and I started to wonder what might happen if this writing bled through into the image.

Also I see every painting through its back story, unless I know nothing about it. So when I look at the provocative painting of Marie-Louise



**Above** Boucher: *The Back Story*, 2010 **Left** Boucher: *The Back Story* #3, 2009, both by Stephen Farthing RA. The drawing on the left has written across it a brief resumé of the life of Marie-Louise O'Murphy. In the painting the text appears back to front

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O'Murphy (c.1752) by François Boucher, all I can think of is the awful fact that she was 14 years old, one of the youngest mistresses of Louis XV of France. I found out about that from reading Duncan Sprott's novel about O'Murphy, *Our Lady of the Potatoes* (Faber and Faber, 1995) and it led me to make the painting called *Boucher: The Back Story* (2010, opposite page, top).

**PB** For the past 20 years, your artistic practice has been founded on painting, drawing, mapping, text and calligraphy. How have you deployed these in your work since graduating from the Royal College of Art in 1976?

**SF** Much of the way I use these different modes of expression comes from my interest in the work of Jackson Pollock. I think there is a connection between what Pollock was doing in his later work and the act of writing; this whole idea of a line having a flow to it, of it being cursive. Pollock isn't producing words, but with gestures of the hand and wrist, and movements of the arm, he is engaged in something to do with writing. Through Pollock I came to understand that brush strokes, drips, lines and words were just so many building blocks with which you could both paint and write.

*...a lot of painters write on the back of their canvases, and I started to wonder what might happen if this writing bled through into the image.'*

**PB** Text and calligraphy have appeared in your work on a piecemeal basis in the past, but the current efflorescence coincides with your growing involvement in books about art. The relationship between word and image has never been more present in your work than it is today.

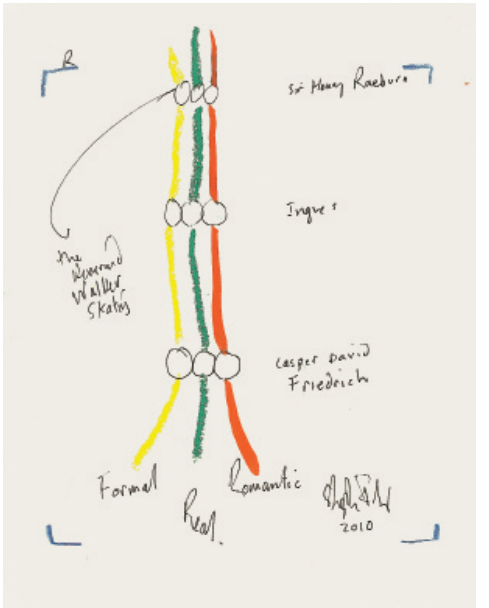
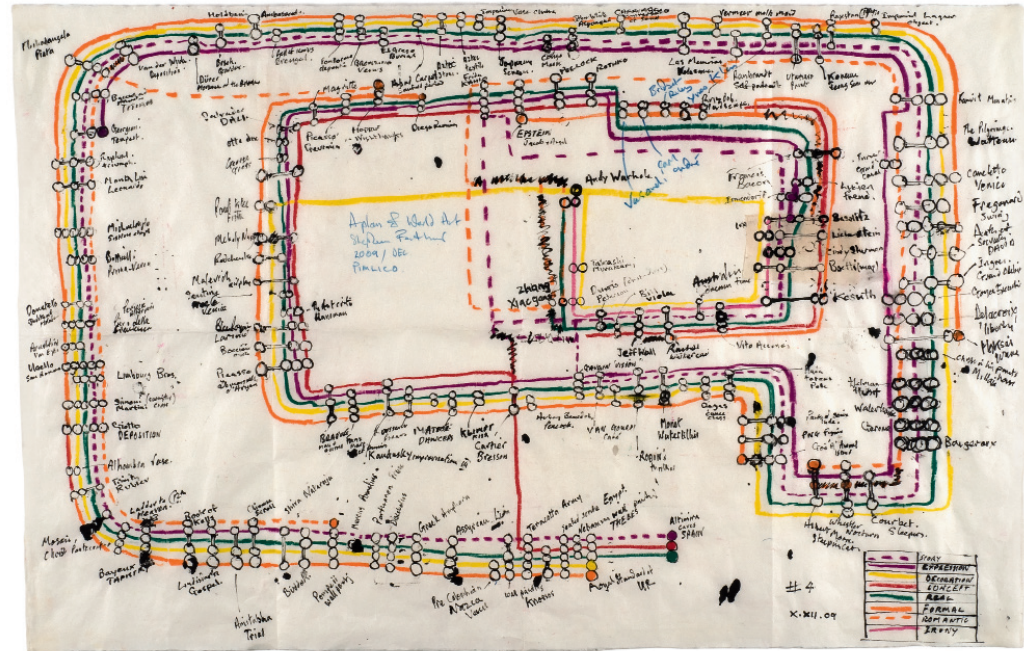
**SF** Words tend to make it into my paintings for poetic reasons, both in terms of the organisation of the picture and the relationship between image and text. Below that there is always an intellectual narrative going on, but the poetic associations are the most important.

**PB** Many of the pieces in the exhibition pay homage to works by major figures from the history of art, from Boucher and Poussin to Sir Henry Raeburn, Van Gogh and Balthus. What is it that interests you about other artists' work?

**SF** The best way of making sense of what you are doing as an artist is to look at the achievements of those who are supposed to have done well or badly, and to try to work out what makes one a success and another a failure. I have no natural affinity with Boucher, Poussin, Balthus or Van Gogh; I'm just trying them out. Raeburn, on the other hand, I love!

**PB** *The Drwn History of Painting: The Map* (2009, top) which refers to Harry Beck's map of the London Underground, 1931, acts as a key to your interest in and understanding of art history.

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**Top** *The Drwn History of Painting: The Map*, 2009 **Above** Raeburn, 2010, details, both by Stephen Farthing

What is the back story to this work?

**SF** When I first became Professor of Drawing at the University of the Arts, London in 2004, I made a map of drawing. What I tried to do was to break down drawing into themes, like 'organisation' and 'decoration', and so on. It wasn't at all successful, and I'm not sure even now whether I could arrange drawing on such a systematic basis. By contrast, the development of painting seems to me to be quite linear and theme-based, and so I decided to test out the same cartographic model on painting. Rather than think about the linearity in terms of time, I thought about it in terms of driving forces that dominate periods and places in art, such as the desire to narrate and express and conceive. I used mapping to explore what it is that drives painters to paint. For me, *The Drwn History of Painting: The Map* was a way of trying

to organise the whole history of painting in my mind.

**PB** How has your view of your own painting and drawing altered over the past 40 years?

**SF** What I think about when I think of 40 years of my life in painting is that I have got better at it, and I enjoy it more. I am more certain now of what I'm doing when I set about painting a picture. And I love the notion that I could have done anything, but I have chosen to do this, and that it still means something to some people at the outset of the 21st century.

**Artists' Laboratory 02: Stephen Farthing RA, The Back Story** Weston Rooms, Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 020 7300 8000, [www.royalacademy.org.uk](http://www.royalacademy.org.uk), until 19 Dec  
**Art: The Whole Story** by Stephen Farthing, £19.95, Thames & Hudson, 2010, see page 64 for review