



Subjective experience

Stacey Manton's paintings of homeless people and those on the edge of society can be unsettling. But, says Helen Clifton, they give his subjects a larger-than-life humanity

The work of painter Stacey Manton will seem strangely familiar to the eyes of most Mancunians.

Maybe it's because he has spent over a decade painting the rain-soaked redbrick doorways, tatty corner shop signs and pock-marked pavements that form the landmarks of thousands of everyday lives.

People may also recognise the human landmarks: the homeless drunk they encounter daily while hurrying to get to work or step over on the way to Superdrug.

Over the last decade, Manton has painstakingly documented the gritty landscape of Manchester, creating hundreds of portraits of the ordinary, forgotten and ignored.

Manton's work has also featured on the sleeves of

current critics' darlings, Mancunian band I Am Kloot. Drummer Andy Hargreaves is a schoolfriend and former flatmate, and Manton's Ladies On A Chorlton Bench (2002) was used on the back of Natural History, the band's first album.

Certainly, the pallor of Manton's subjects perfectly complements Kloot songwriter Jonny Bramwell's dry Manchester-inspired musings.

"The way their faces are dishevelled and weather beaten, they are just more crumpled and interesting to look at than the average Joe in their pinstriped suit," Manton explains. "The people on street corners, the people at bus stops – that is what really makes the city for me."

After training in graphic design at Stockport College, Manton moved to Hong Kong aged just 18 to work as an illustrator. But as his salary increased, so did his frustration. He soon returned to Manchester, took up painting and now lives and works in the semi-rural town of Romiley, near Stockport.

"I am fascinated by the human form and by human figures," he says. "I just got sick of being told what to do. I knew that I wanted to paint."

Manton wanders the streets of the city centre and south Manchester, and, using a cigarette lighter-sized 9mm Minox spy camera, he photographs the faces he finds interesting, before converting their likenesses into works of art.

Cute old ladies on benches, buskers and those waiting at bus stops have all acted as subjects. Yet more often than not, Manton paints down and outs, drug addicts, alcoholics and those suffering from mental health problems.

He denies he is voyeuristic and always asks permission before snapping. He says he has never had any negative feedback from his work.

"I don't like upsetting people – it is all about the

Manton (right) bases his paintings on photographs of real people, often but not always the homeless and marginalised. Right: Ladies on a Chorlton Bench

person. I give them a few quid and they usually oblige," he smiles. "If they are not happy, they just tell you to go away."

After a period of mental illness in his twenties, documenting those on the edge is a position Manton can relate to.

"I think you do see yourself in these sort of people," he says. "You think to yourself, it could happen to anybody if you end up in the wrong circumstances, or if your luck runs out."

His paintings are huge, seemingly designed to draw attention to his subjects and challenge the viewer. The message seems to be, you can ignore me anywhere else but you can't ignore me here.

He agrees. "When people walk past in the street, they don't have to make eye contact. But in the exhibition, you are forced to look at their image and you are forced to reflect on that person. It makes you stop and think.

"These are the things you see every day but you don't really look at. When you look at my images, you feel less conscious about looking at the person."

Manton's paintings have just come to the end of a two-year exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, in a section dedicated to the city.

"When I was a kid, I used to stand around in galleries staring at paintings – and I saw a group of kids standing and looking at mine," Manton says. "I never thought I would get to this stage where I would have art in a public gallery that was being viewed by the next generation."

Manton has also acted as a technical adviser for film crews and regularly teaches workshops. But is he earning a living? "Barely," he says. He seems distinctly unfazed. "It is hard work but I am not doing too bad.

"I wanted these works to be seen by the public. Selling paintings is always good, but it doesn't really interest me, to be honest."

Travelling all over the world has given him some good material, especially San Francisco, he says. "There were a lot of Vietnam vets there – people who had lost their limbs."

Does he find it intimidating approaching and chatting with such damaged people?

"I am so used to it now," he says. "I usually sit down and have a chat with them. It's much easier because then they are getting something out of it.

"Most of them seem to be quite happy to be doing what they are doing. They don't really want to change. Possibly they are defined by their circumstances or by their addictions."

Manton receives plenty of responses to his work. After seeing *The Banjo Player* (2006), a BBC photographer emailed him some images of the same man playing the banjo in Manchester's Market Street during the 1960s. Manton donated a painting to the busker, something he does with many of his subjects.

"He just carried on playing," he smiles. "But it's really nice to do that. I guess it shows that I am not profiting from them."

Barefoot in the Street (2004) is one of Manton's most shocking images. A old man sits on a rainy pavement outside the Friendship Inn, Fallowfield, shoeless and cadaverous.



"He was really unusual to see," says Manton. "But his social worker has emailed me to say he has got a flat and is now back on his feet, which was really nice to know.

"There are a lot of stories behind most of the paintings."

Influenced by Hogarth, Manton's work is reminiscent in some ways of the social realism of classics like *Gin Lane*. Other influences are Rembrandt, Velazquez and Goya.

Although he doesn't class his work as social documentary, his intention is to capture his subjects for posterity. "Otherwise, I guess these people will come and go, and nobody will have any record of them. It is a bit of an obsession, really.

"I feel a responsibility to get a good likeness. They are real people and the reason I paint them from photographs is because I want them to look real. I want to create that sort of realness to maximum effect."

Manton's work thrusts the problems of homelessness, loneliness, drink and drug addiction into people's faces. Yet more powerfully, his paintings imbue those so often rendered inhumane or ordinary with a larger than life humanity. The tables are turned on to the viewer – Manton's subjects return your stare.

"They strike an emotional chord with people. They are not the kind of paintings you want hanging on your living room wall. Some people find them quite upsetting.

"They either really like them or they can't understand them. The people that like them really like them. But it is good to get any reaction." ■

"You think to yourself, it could happen to anybody if you end up in the wrong circumstances."