

The bare bones. *of drawing*

His treatment of the human form combines classical influences with personal, contemporary innovation, which has made his work widely collected. But **Mark Demsteader** is far from your typical artist. Words: Martha Alexander

Mark Demsteader has not taken the most congruous of career paths, moving seamlessly from wholesale butcher – someone who can navigate a whole side of beef with a sharp knife – to figurative artist and master of delicate lines.

He is not offended by the frank suggestion that he looks more like a butcher than an artist, if not because of his height, build and big black boots, then because of his hands, which would be better suited to a meat cleaver than a chalk pastel. It is clearly something that has been mentioned before.

Demsteader radiates an awkward mixture of passion for his practice and modest uncertainty about his position as a renowned figurative talent, despite having successfully exhibited work all over the world.

It's clear he was never going to follow the traditional path of going to art school to be unconventional, despite a stint at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. "Art school wasn't for me. I didn't enjoy it, because I like Victorian art and things that were out of fashion at the time," he says, explaining that there was emphasis on the abstract and his interests lay entirely with figures. "I needed to get a job, really."

And so, after 15 years as a butcher, during which time he had been learning to draw on the side, he put down his knives and became a professional artist 12 years ago. "The business was folding and all I knew was being a butcher. It was either get a job at Tesco or have a go at being an artist. So I came down to London with a portfolio and just went knocking on gallery doors. It was difficult, to say the least. It took a

year or so to get my work accepted anywhere."

Now from his studio in a village near Oldham on the outskirts of Manchester, Demsteader creates elegant drawings of the human form, using chalk pastels and paper collage. The results of using such simple materials are extraordinary and his works are widely collected, yet this is the man who cannot remember his childhood art classes. "It's not really something you think you're going to get into. Up in Manchester it never really seemed a career option."

Scratching the surface

His interest in art was triggered on a school trip to the Louvre in Paris (the first art gallery he had ever been in), where his approach to the paintings was driven by a curiosity for how they were created. "I saw a massive painting with steps going up to it. The only thing I was interested in was how they did it and

so I went up to it and tried to scratch a bit of paint off until a guard came out and went absolutely mad."

This preoccupation with how work is made remains primarily important in his career. "What goes on

underneath all the paint? What forms the basis of it all? That's what I'm interested in."

His figures are delicate and fairly pale, often with strong contrasts between background and foreground which he says was inspired by his interest in Victorian paintings. His subjects are aesthetically pleasing – glamorous, young and slender – yet there is no hint of the seediness that can sometimes tarnish the efforts of even the most accomplished artists working with the female form. This is perhaps because he seems indifferent to the state of his subjects. In fact, he would prefer to describe people who have interesting rather than idealised bodies, but as he learnt quickly at the start of his career, some things make more commercial sense than others. "The market does dictate what you do to a certain degree. I used to draw anyone who came into the life drawing classes. But one criticism from a gallery was, 'Nice drawing, but who wants to stick an old man on their wall?' Galleries are looking from the commercial side."

However, it's not as if he is compromising himself because now his style has been cultivated into what are trademark lines. "Anything is a challenge as the act of drawing and painting is still the same. I would draw anyone and yeah, it is more interesting to paint someone of 20 stones, but my style is linear now."

This was in clear evidence when considering his most famous muse to date. All angles and limbs, veteran model Erin O'Connor is a dream for an artist like Demsteader. "Erin is fabulous and very down to earth. It's not hard to draw someone so linear."

Caught off-guard

Demsteader's work concentrates on the expressive parts of the body, so faces and hands are more

"I used to draw anyone who came into the life drawing classes but who wants to stick an old man on their wall?"



PREVIOUS PAGE Sheri seated with arm raised, pastel and collage on paper, 81x112 cm **LEFT** Sam small study 1, oil on board, 35.5x51cm **RIGHT** Erin head study 1, pastel and collage on paper, 61x81cm





detailed than the body itself, which is left quite hazy. His choice to use photographs is firstly so that he has a permanent reference with which to flesh out the details, but there is another reason, too. "I am looking for the moment in-between poses. Being caught off-guard slightly is not something that can be posed but that is why photography helps."

He works on 10 drawings at any one time so he won't get too involved in perfecting anything. This acts as a process of elimination, as only half of them will work. "I'm not afraid to throw them away or restart them. I follow the process and know when to leave stuff or when to do more. Just getting one simple line, the clean line, is the hardest thing."

At first glance, you might not see the collage elements, which are a vital part of his work and something he has always included. "A lot of people think it is all paint," he admits. "I like the suggestion of something under the surface of the painting that is not obvious. I use paper to get a sharp edge and it adds a lot, I think."

His accurate treatment of the figure shows a genuine understanding of anatomy, which brings integrity to his work. However unlikely it might seem,

the link between butchery and life drawing is not, says Demsteader, so tenuous.

"You get to understand the softness of flesh and the suggestion of the solidity of bone underneath."

His hunger to find out how things work, and the fact that he is now a proven master of form, with international exhibitions under his belt, has meant that he now wants to work in every other medium, from linocuts to sculpture. "It's endless what you can do with the figure. There are so many approaches and I want look at them all."



Mark Demsteader trained briefly at The Slade, but largely in evening life drawing classes. His awards include the Lyceum Prize, the Sidney Andrew's Scholarship and The Public Eye Award. He

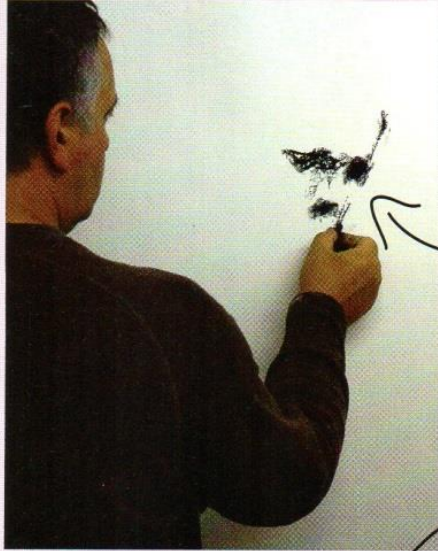
has exhibited all over the globe, including in America. He lives and works outside Manchester. Mark has a solo show at Panter & Hall Gallery, London, 14-30 October. www.demsteader.com

ABOVE *Cipriana head study*
2, pastel and collage on
paper, 81x81cm

Techniques of the Professionals

Working up the form

Mark Demsteader shares secrets of his working process, which involves photography and collage as well as drawing, in an attempt to capture the moment between poses



A key part of my working process is taking photographs, but I look closely at the instances when the model is between poses. I am looking for something different. It is difficult to explain and can only really be found in photographs. I make some preliminary sketches to get a basic outline and use the photos for the details.

It all starts with tonal drawing with lines and shading. I use a black and white pastel at the start, which is good for making shapes. Then I throw a load of water over the pastels and see what drips and smudges.



Then I tear up bits of paper to make the collage to hint at the bone structure and try to work up the structure. This is where my knowledge as a butcher comes in useful!

In any drawing I don't work up every area – I leave some if it. I may also make some things darker or lighter.

I do more stuff than I actually need, and don't settle for whatever comes first. When I'm drawing something I'll start thinking that it won't work, but I'll do it anyway. You have to work in multiples to get the eye focusing on what's wrong with your picture.

