

Winter Fires

A conversation about the portraits
Mik Godley and Francois Matarasso

Introduction

Each project in the 'Regular Marvels' series is a collaboration between me and an artist whose work I value. Although the conception, planning and delivery of the work are mine, the involvement of an artist working in a different discipline or form is an essential part of the process.

I am a writer and my text is intended to function as literature, albeit not a very elevated kind. But whatever its qualities, it can only communicate a partial understanding of the experiences and people I'm writing about. So the perspective of another artist, like filmmaker Ben Wigley in *Where We Dream*, or painter Mik Godley in *Winter Fires*, offers another perspective on the subject of the book. The result, while naturally still partial, is richer than either of our interpretations alone. Perhaps it even creates a third kind of understanding.

'Regular Marvels' is an exploratory work, committed, among other things, to demystifying the processes of artistic research and creation. This blog is a key means of achieving that: the open, sometimes even contradictory nature of its posts enacts a commitment to thinking in public.

This conversation is a further step in that direction. A few weeks ago, Mik and I met in his Nottingham studio to talk through the experience of working together on the portraits for Winter Fires. We'd wanted to leave a bit of time after the publication, at the end of November 2012, to allow the experience to settle. This video gives a flavour of that conversation.

We spoke for about three quarters of an hour, and there is a transcript of the full conversation here, for anyone whose curiosity is whetted but not satisfied by the video. This text has been edited to make it easier to read, and checked by both of us

François Matarasso
23 March 2013

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A conversation between Mik Godley and Francois Matarasso

Primary Studios, Nottingham, 2 February 2013

A Different Heartbeat: Liverpool Royal Infirmary Kidney Dialysis Unit

MG That was very much a case of doing very straightforward, fairly quick sketches, but trying to make them accurate, both in terms of very formal aspects, with recording what something looks like, a perception, but equally trying to be open to the situation. It's interesting: I'm never quite sure how it works. But somehow, through the process of the more straightforward, analytical drawing, of observation, something seeps through of perhaps the situation and the personalities involved and my reaction to it.

I often try, when I'm in that sort of situation not to have too fixed an agenda. That really is born of 30 years of teaching life drawing where it's interesting, mostly, to just respond in as immediate fashion as possible to the situation. So I was able to bring that to the kidney dialysis unit. That was my baptism of fire.

FM I thought the results were very good and they were well received. There is a magic in the iPad drawing because you're able to play that back to people. For me it brought back memories of a photograph being developed in a dark room the way we used to. People really responded well, I think; they had a lot of respect for what you did, for the craft in it. Although for reasons out of our control, the book got long delayed and then sadly got printed on the cheap, was a nice piece of work. For me it was the beginning of two things.

One was that it I began to allow myself to write more impressionistically—with more of my own feelings about situations. The other was that interaction between the pictures and the text, though I don't think all my ideas in that project worked or came off. For me, the most powerful of the images is of the guy who's half asleep. I think that's an extraordinary image and I think quite a lot of people felt that. It says so much about what the experience of having dialysis *feels* like and therefore what the project we were talking about felt like and what that experience was about.

MG That was the last portrait that I did for that project. That was interesting because he was quite a young, macho guy. One of the things the playback facility on this iPad drawing had done was to win people over, as you say. They were able to see the drawings, develop, if you like.



One of the things you'd made clear from the start was that you felt that photography was inappropriate—shooting a camera into somebody's face when they're very vulnerable and have tubes coming in and out of them. He especially, he felt that aspect very keenly because he was fairly young, pretty tough kind of guy who was quite resistant, I think. It was literally showing him the previous sketches played back to him, he said 'Alright then.' But he was actually undergoing the dialysis and it wiped him out, so he was asleep most of the time.

I knew he was asleep because he was moving around a little bit. It was quite difficult, technically, for me to do, simply because he wasn't keeping still. I spent quite a lot of time working from him, about 45 minutes, an hour, something like that. Yet he moved a lot, periodically, because he was asleep. He'd stay still for a few minutes and then move.

But he was, how would you say, grudging in his respect of the result. He said, 'Oh yes, it's alright.'

FM It was honest. I think he did appreciate it. He wasn't the kind of person who would go over the top about something like that.

MG No, certainly not; but he brought home to me what you had discussed previously about how photography wouldn't be the right approach at all. So I think it was a very correct decision on your part.

Moving towards 'Regular Marvels'

FM I think of '*A different heartbeat*', as a transitional piece in my work. There were, probably, three or four things that I did between about 2008-2010 that were feeling their way towards a different way of writing, towards a different way of understanding, a different way of communicating. I was trying to do two things, but didn't really know how.

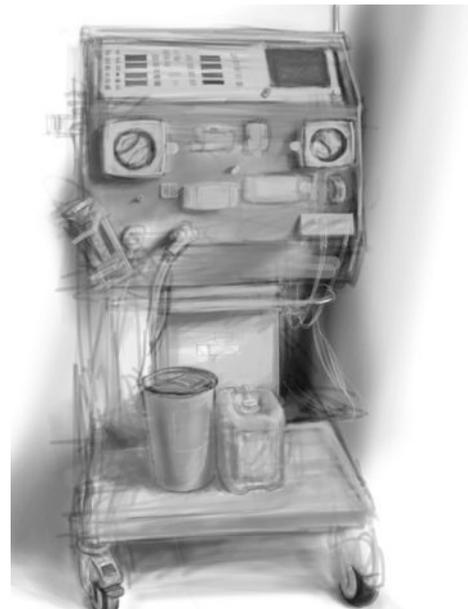
The first was to write texts that the people I was writing about would take pleasure in reading—that meant something to them as opposed to speaking only to an academic or a professional audience. The other was this paradox: it seemed to me that I had been writing or arguing about the importance of art as a way of knowing for about 30 years. But in the work I'd done in research I'd used every way of knowing except the artistic to try and communicate that view. I'd used management ideas and evaluation ideas, sociological ideas and, probably also, anthropological ideas.

When I started 'Regular Marvels', the idea came to me of doing something about how having a practice as an artist might change one's experience of aging. I felt that there was unfinished business, as it were, in terms of what we'd done with *A different heartbeat*, partly because the final result hadn't been as good as it should have been.

MG There was for me as well because, don't forget, when you first asked me to come on board with the Liverpool job you wanted some sketches in a sketch book and I said, 'Let's try the iPad.' You were a bit iffy at first.

FM I'd forgotten that.

MG So I took a sketchbook as well. For me, that project proved a valuable case in terms of fieldwork, if you like; it was great. Not just the portraits, but also I can remember the dialysis machine that I spent—how long was it?—hours and hours and hours. I think it was three hours. I tried to do it twice before and had been shunted out by nurses saying, 'We need this now.' So I sat, literally, for three hours, not daring to move, to do this drawing. Apart from having to keep showing nurses what I was doing. So it was very valuable in that respect as well.



I guess, from your perspective when you asked me again, you will have had the iPad in mind?

Planning *Winter Fires*

FM Yes, I did have the iPad in mind, absolutely. There were two reasons for asking. One was that sense of unfinished business, that there was stuff that we could both learn here and explore. Indeed, I don't think we've finished what could be found out of all that.

But the other thing was there was a big practical obstacle. I was meeting people all over the UK and Northern Ireland. I think the youngest person I met was 63 and the oldest was in her high 80s—I don't know exactly how old she was. I didn't have the resources to ask you to come with me: it would have doubled the cost of the project, and as it was the project was done on a shoestring.

I didn't have the resources to ask you to come with me, but actually it would also have changed the dynamic of those situations, because mostly I was meeting people one to one and they were often inviting me in to their homes. We would sit, they would make me a cup of tea or we'd have a bowl of soup and we'd spend two or three hours getting to know each other. So there was a lot of trust being built up then.

So I thought, 'Okay, I have to take photographic portraits for an artist to work from'—and you were the only artist that I thought I could ask that of because your own practice had been about exploring the remaking of photographs from the work you'd been doing around Silesia.



MG Well yes, I'd been working from JPEGs, that kind of thing. I'd gradually arrived at an interest in looking at and working with photographic material. Many years ago, I found it very difficult. This is probably, partly why I have a particular dialogue with it, if you like.



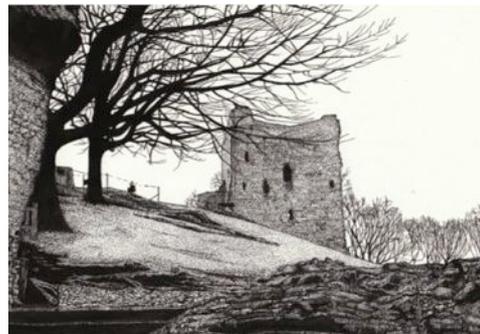
In a sense, compared to working with a life situation if you're doing portraits or something of that nature, a photograph gives you different kinds of information. Sometimes, if you compare it to a life situation, it's quite frustrating. But if you don't—and this is the kind of position that I've gradually arrived at—if you begin to look at it with something else in mind then really it is to do with the business of perception. So it's quite analytical in the sense that I'm very consciously thinking about, 'What am I looking at? How am I looking at it?'

So in that respect I gradually turned around, especially when I'm actually using the Internet to gather material. I'm not saying it's an advantage not being able to be present in somebody's kitchen, or whatever, but it's turned around to have a different validity. I'm not sure it's equivalent to being at the kitchen table, but it has another validity.

That is a kind of attitudinal thing which has grown over the years I think, which is odd because it's not quite the same as how I would have thought years ago about the idea of copying from a photograph. It's a different kind of interrogation, somehow. To explain it in words is very difficult though.

Drawing, photography and *The English Castle*

FM It's very interesting. As you've been talking, it's reminded me of the time I did some of my most serious, substantial visual artwork. I was doing drawings of castles for the book that I came out in 1993. I worked on those drawings for about five years. I worked from photographs because I would go and visit castles and I didn't have the time to stay and draw on site. So I would take a lot of photographs and then I would decide what might turn in to a drawing.

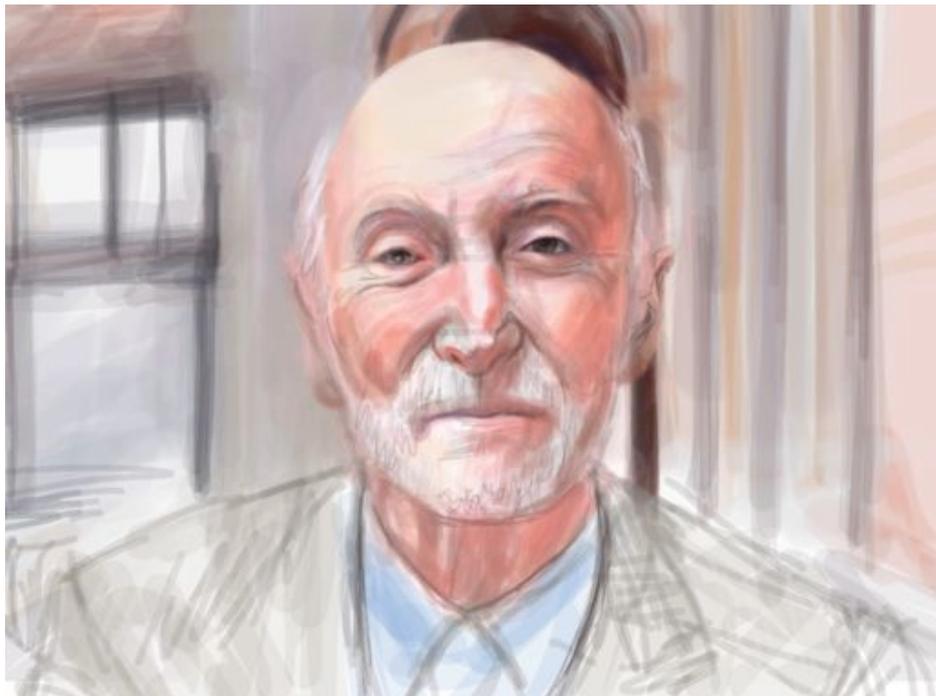


But I don't know why I wanted them to be drawings and not photographs. Actually, I haven't really thought about that. One of the original inspirations was seeing one of the [Wainwright](#) books about walking in the Lake District; they were all hand drawn in pen and ink, and hand lettered. So far as I have a visual ability, it was always monochrome, I've never responded to colour in my own work, but I loved black and white drawing.

I always had a sense that you were cheating if you worked from a photograph. It wasn't, somehow, pure enough. It wasn't the correct thing to do. But now I think, like you, that it's a different kind of interrogation. Of course you didn't have then what you had in the kidney dialysis unit. You didn't meet the person, you weren't part of the atmosphere of the place. So you were entirely dependent on the information that came to you in the photograph in this case.

Working on the portraits

MG Yes, I must admit that I did, on occasion, move things around a bit so that they worked better. My other work has tried to have an honest documentary aspect to it in the sense that it's kind of recording information or perceptions, whereas with this project I did play around a little bit, which was quite fun. It was partly to think through the process and think about the possibilities of what the iPad would do.



If you remember, the initial drawings that I did were pretty straight-laced, and I didn't think they were very successful. But as time went on, there literally two or three, sort of 'ah-ha' moments, usually in the shower getting ready to start work, 'Ah, I know what I want to do.'

So that was really helpful in developing the whole way that the drawings moved on as well, from quite boring drawings to begin with.

FM I remember there were a couple that you had done, when I saw them I was a bit worried; they felt rather tight and almost photorealist, and we had a conversation then. You went in a different direction after that.

MG Yes. Also, I seem to remember it had come after a period of not working, so I actually had to get back into working again. I can't remember what it was, but there was something—

FM It's because you were moving in to this studio.

MG Oh that was it—I was doing this place up, wasn't I? So, my working was with a four inch brush and a roller, on the ceiling.

FM Yes, that's right. So I just want to reflect a bit on the process, on what happened in each case. I hadn't told the people before I was going to meet them that I wanted to do a portrait. So I met them, I explained what I was doing and we had conversations, as I say, generally two hours or longer. They were very rich conversations. One of the disappointments in the book is there's so much I couldn't put in. But I have this sense that these books shouldn't take longer than an hour or two to read. I don't want to burden people with this great tome they have to commit their lives to reading. So there's a lot of distillation.

Anyway, then I said I wanted to make a portrait and I explained why. I had told them I was working with you at the beginning, I think. We talked about where they would like to be to be photographed. It was important that happened at the end, because partly we'd established a certain relationship and had begun to build some trust and understanding. I have some idea about who they were. Some of the photographs were quite posed—for instance, the portrait of Terri Morrow, which you've done in a very distinctive way. She decided that she wanted to be looking up at the studio where she did her first ever drama workshop. Part of that story was about her overcoming her agoraphobia to get in the lift to go on to the first floor. Her looking upwards has resonances that are very important.



So the first creation of an image was from a discussion between the person in the image and myself. I took the photographs and then I showed them the photographs. They told me which ones they liked or didn't like. Sometimes we took more. So we ended up with my sense of what they were happy with, and then you got that image.

MG When we looked at them together we had a very brief conversation, and I was saying which ones I thought make good portraits from my perspective. Then we quickly whittled those down to, I don't know how many we did in the end, but it was about 13 or 14, something like that.

Then I just started to work and to be fair I did actually think one of the things I could try out was to trace off from the photograph and use a line drawing as a starting point. Those were the very tight drawings. I suppose it worked in a certain sense, but in fact it made the drawings very stilted and awkward.

So we had to start again and, as I say, because it was done over quite a long period of weeks and I was testing new ideas, they all ended up being completely different. But equally there were certain things that I thought fitted the personalities.



One of the obvious ones in that respect was Lene who came to the book launch, in the red shirt. Basically what I did was start from a solid mass of that red—you photographed her in a bar, which was a similar red. So that was using the wall as the background and then painting it so that that red came through in certain parts of what would be flesh.

So each one was really done in stages rather than the being done all the way through. I think they would have been more similar then. But, because of the timeframe and each one taking quite a lot of time, I would naturally get to a point where I'd go, 'I can't quite figure out what to do with that', so I'd go on to another one and then return to it later. They came out looking very individual and quite different.

FM The Lena portrait was one of those I was rather frightened of at first, because it's such a powerful image. It is fantastic. She had come to meet me wearing this bright red shirt, and she's a very strong person. Where we had met there had been this big red wall, and I suggested using it as a background. She really liked the idea, and she really went for that. I saw how much she'd liked the image when she came to the launch wearing the same red shirt, deliberately. It was a powerful image to put on the front of the book—it's literally in your face.

There are others that do it in different ways but, for me, that image is one of those that say 'We're trying to say something different about what it is to be a creative older person than is usually said'.

MG One of the things that you showed me were the standard images from reports and things. It was something that you wanted me to take on board really. The idea that what we didn't want was this, sort of, happy clappy idea and a youth's vision of what an old person is, and should look like and all the rest of it. So we were after something else.

FM That's where the deliberate posing of a formal portrait was important, because these weren't casual snapshots. I was asking people, in effect, to represent themselves. That in itself doesn't happen that much, given we're a culture that's forever taking photographs of each other. The only posed photographs we ever do are the ones where we say, 'Smile'. One of the things I specifically said to people was 'Don't smile'. We sometimes, particularly with the painters, had conversations about how in the history of portrait painting you never see anybody smiling. It's not how we present ourselves in those formal things.

MG It's not just that though is it? It's basically because people can't smile for the length of time of a portrait being taken.

FM But the smiling thing is a very specific performance, isn't it, just as much as the not smiling is a performance.

MG It is now, but isn't that part of the reason that there was such attention paid to the Mona Lisa, because it was a barely smiling portrait? Go on.

FM Only two of the people were unhappy with aspects of their portraits.

FM One was Sally Cottis. She liked everything except how you had sketched her half finished work on the easel. She thought it made her work look vague, whereas actually she sees it as being extremely precise.



MG As far as that bit was concerned it was just a quick sketch in minutes.

FM Absolutely, but it was interesting to me. I thought what she came back with reflected her sense of herself as an artist—‘If that’s my art, it’s got to be my art.’ We solved that by



putting in the photograph of what she’d actually done. So she was very happy with that and it worked very well. In fact, it’s one of my favourite portraits. Again it’s a powerful image.

MG I ended up using two photographs with that one, because I used the window that is mostly—not wholly, but mostly—from the original photograph just cropped and placed in there. But then, what I did was enlarge her relative to the actual image. Only a little bit, but in the drawing she’s actually bigger than the photograph.

Odd things like that, there’s always a little bit of pushing and pulling just to tweak the composition, mostly. It’s all compositional stuff there.

FM Then there was the other image where the person had said she was happy with the first state image she’d seen. Then about three months later, she got the whole text—the draft text of the book, with I the images so that people could see how the text and the image would work together. At that point she said, ‘I don’t like this image, can we go back to the earlier one?’

I knew that you had done more work on the earlier image, so that hadn’t worried me. I asked you to send me that, and in fact you sent me all four states of the image that existed. I sent her the four to say, ‘I’m not sure which one you meant.’ Her memory was, that actually, she was actually posed differently, her other arm was up or something. So it was very interesting that, in the end, even a very sophisticated visual artist had a memory that was different from what you’d done.

MG I think the other thing you said was that she said she thought it was monochrome and there wasn't a monochrome one.

FM No. All of the earlier versions tended to be paler, I think, they tended to be less worked as you added to them. In the end I said to her what I had said to people all the way through. I hadn't said it so much about the images because I hadn't thought it would be a worry, but I had said about my use of their words and their stories, that if, up to the point that it went to the printer, they weren't happy, they didn't need to give me a reason they just needed to say, 'No I don't want to do this anymore.'

She decided that she didn't want her image. But she said, very honestly, 'It's vanity.' It didn't fit her sense of herself. What better reason can one have, in a sense, for not liking an image, that you don't see yourself in it?

MG It can be quite a clash can't it? Because basically, as is well known, we all have this self-image which is often nothing like the way other people see us. So there's not much we can do about that.

FM No, it's like when you hear your voice recorded and you think, 'That's not how I speak.'

MG I know, I've got a terrible Yorkshire accent! Never mind, I'll just have to live with it.



FM The images that you produced are fantastic and I love the variety of them. So the ones that were, maybe, a bit more in the realist style, worked very

well as part of the set because there's such a nice contrast. They echo the differences of personality, situation and context.

They are great advocates for the book, as it were. I think they do make people interested, straight away, in what this is about. They challenge some of the clichés, not in a simplistic way, but in a rich and complex way. They ask us to look again at people. So I couldn't have been more pleased with how that worked out.

How do you feel about them? Has it had any effect on how you're thinking about your work now, more widely?

MG Certainly. As I said, it posed quite a number of technical challenges and pushed the way that I've been able to develop my use of the iPad and the particular drawing app that I used.

But also, having spent so much time on and thinking about portraiture and what it can do, as well as this idea of working with photographic images, it's very much cemented the idea of working with portraits as a way of trying to get an idea of things.

For my own work, I've got a couple of things that have come out of it. First of all it connected with portraits that I've been doing just generally of people, included you. Now, in the long term, probably over the next year or two, I'd like to gradually build up a collection of portraits of my own community, partly, as we discussed some time ago, because I want to go and try to do the same to a community in Chicago.

As you said, our discussions that began on those trips up to Liverpool and back, about this idea of another way of knowing, keep bouncing around in my thoughts. How this idea of it being somehow allied to documentary way of looking and thinking about things, is very much appropriate to the kind of work I've been arriving at for a number of years—which is to do with perception, it's to do with finding ways of learning about something through what we see, be it actual or virtual, it's still kind of learning.

So in terms of portraiture but also in terms of the process, it has been important. I'm not saying I've come to any kind of grand conclusions but it has helped to push that on further down the line. Also, frankly, the public response has been marvellous, both on the book launch, that was great, but equally people online, friends. When the book was launched quite a number of people went to your site and saw the images, and have actually either downloaded or requested a copy of the book. So the feedback, in that respect, has been very positive. So I think, 'Yes, this has got legs', this way of working, it's got some way to go yet, but it works.