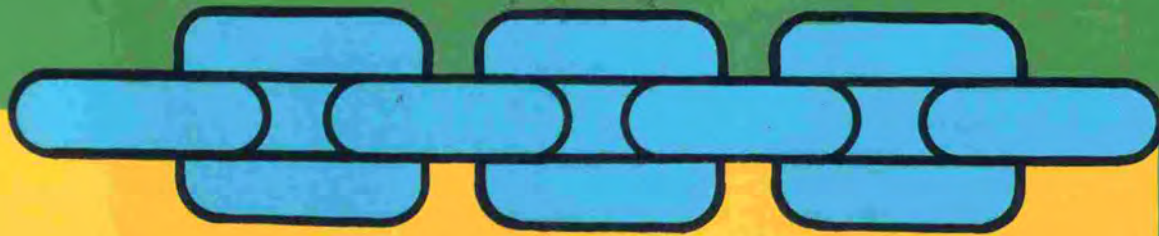


# Modern Painters

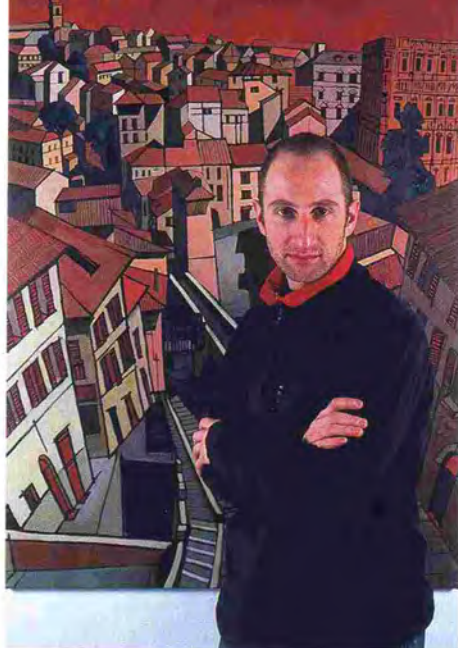


of death and visions



Kazuo Ishiguro interviews Andrew Burgess

# The View from the Tower



**Kazuo Ishiguro** It might be interesting to hear something of how you produced these paintings, where they came from. I know you've been doing a lot of travelling with a sketchbook. How does that work exactly?

**Andrew Burgess** These paintings follow on from an earlier body of work, a set of paintings of American cityscapes, mostly New York and San Francisco and some other cities such as Atlanta. I travelled across America by car taking a series of sketchbooks. I'm attracted to odd vantage points so I would find the highest building in town from which to draw. Often there's a restaurant at the top of these skyscrapers or at least a viewing point. I like that feeling of being removed from the city and the crowds below. When I started this current body of work, I wanted to travel for a while but I didn't want to go back to America and spend a long time there. I wanted to go and look at Italian Renaissance paintings and particularly Piero frescoes. I also had the idea in the back of my mind that there were all these medieval towers in places like Bologna and San Gimignano where I could go up high and get an aerial view of the city or town below.

**KI** When you arrive in a town the first thing you look for is a high place?

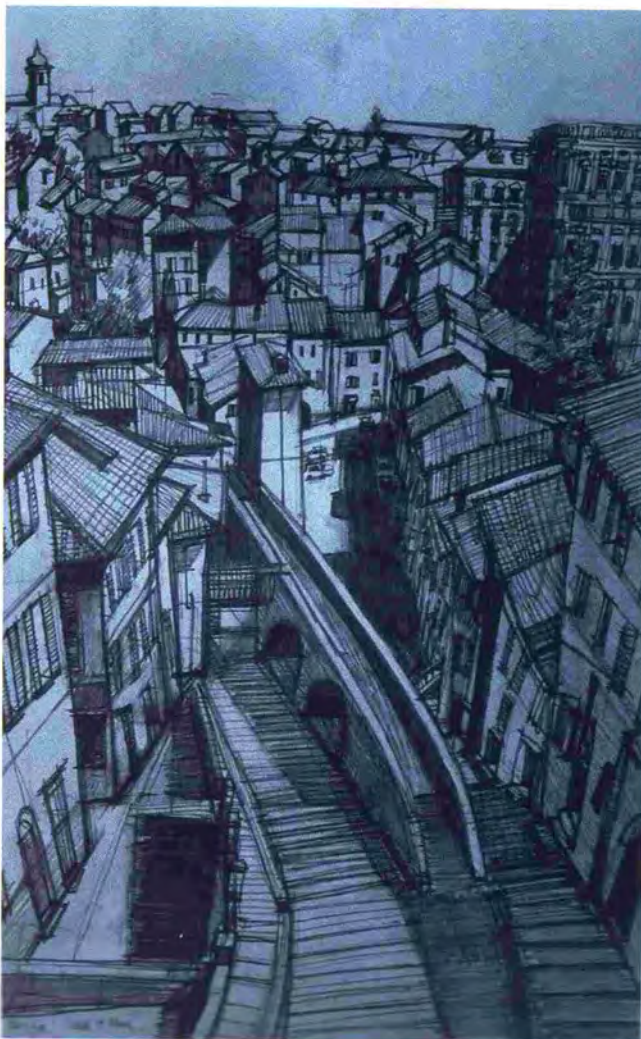
**AB** Well, it's not quite like that. I might find other interesting locations, back streets, for example, which give a different feel. I won't go for the obvious tourist spots. I am quite obsessive with the drawing. I remember arriving in Bologna and I'd planned to be in Italy for six or seven weeks, and I started drawing as soon as I got there. I went to the hotel, dropped my bags off, went off for a walk and ended up drawing for two hours on the first day. Usually I'd draw for five or six hours a day. Often I'd climb up these towers, such as the Torre Asinelli in Bologna, which would take about twenty minutes just to get up, and I'd sit there for two or three hours perched on one of the ledges.

**KI** The two things that would probably strike somebody first of all coming to your paintings is that they're often, but not always, cityscapes from a very high perspective, and secondly the fact that there are no people in them. This is often perverse, because you are looking at places, downtown areas, Italian cities, that you would overwhelmingly

associate with heat and crowds. You've removed all the people, and the cars that occasionally crop up in your pictures are almost like substitute people. An alien might think perhaps that these were the inhabitants, kind of pseudo-humanistic creatures crawling about in the heat. But even with the cars you are very careful to blank out the windscreens, so you can't see in. Are these both distancing effects?

**AB** Yes, the two things are absolutely related. Maybe I go up high to get away from the people. For instance I love New

York, but I find it very oppressive because it's so intense and loud. I love going there and having a wild time with friends, but I think that, to work, I need to be removed from the hyperactivity of the city. So I find quieter spots where I can look at the 'macro' sweep of it and not have to deal with the 'micro'. And I don't want the paintings to be picturesque or what I would call illustrative – scenes of everyday life, people shopping, sitting in cafés. I want something different. I'm bringing out the abstract qualities of these spaces and structures. I'm more



Above:  
Andrew Burgess with his painting  
*Perugia, Umbria, 1999*, oil on canvas,  
122 × 91.4 cm.  
Collection of Kazuo Ishiguro.  
Photo: Tolga Cem

*San Gimignano, Perugia, 1999*  
oil on canvas, 122 × 91.4 cm

interested in representing architectural space on a two dimensional plane, taking this big sweep.

The cars are interesting. I didn't really want to draw them but removing all anecdotal detail was making the paintings unrealistically empty, so that the suspension of disbelief was no longer tenable. So I started to enjoy painting the cars and the trucks with a slightly simplified, abstract quality, with dark windows, and that added to an ominous mood – it kind of heightened it.

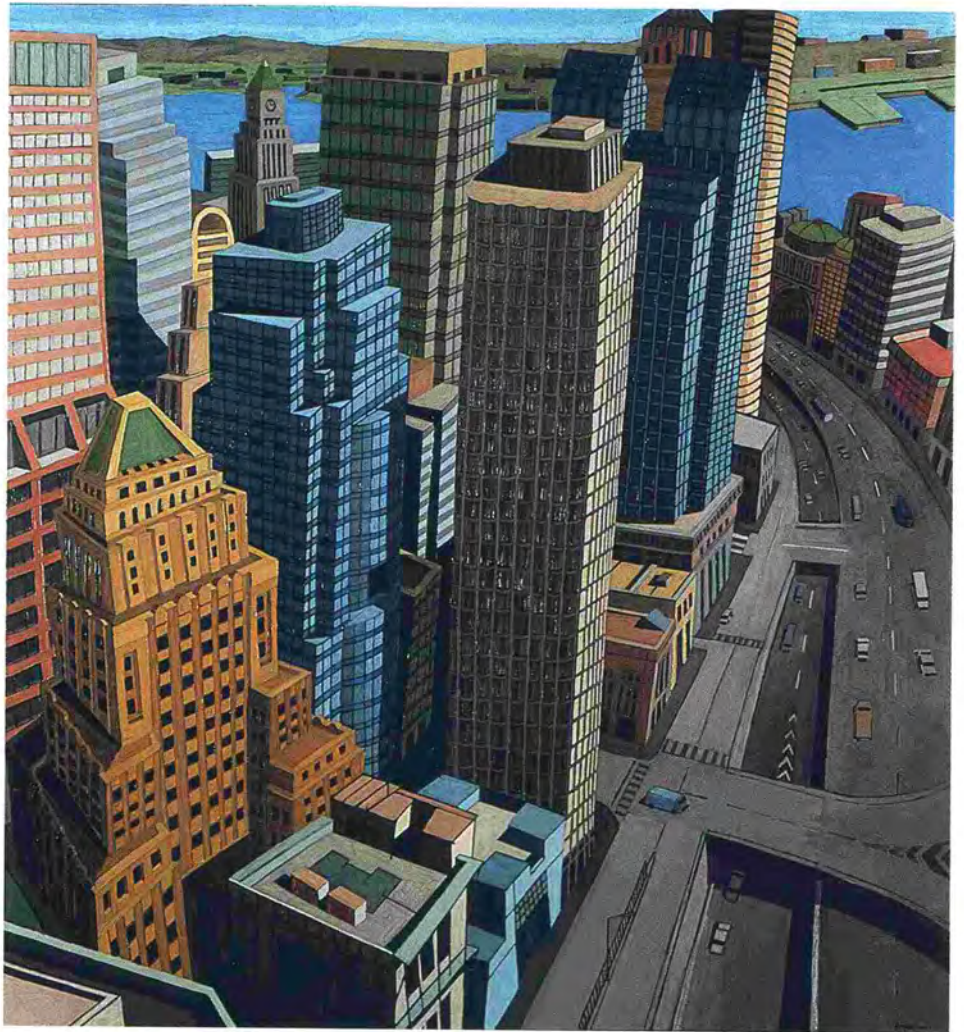
**KI** Looking at a work of yours, it doesn't shriek out as being abstract, but you know that in some subtle way it's quite far from the purely representational. You do several other things, don't you – when you're painting, you actually invent your colours. The colours are created from a mixture of memory and imagination and it's very much to do with your emotional landscape. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

**AB** Well, firstly, a painting is a painting, so it becomes a separate entity anyway. But the way I work is that I draw outside and paint in the studio away from the actual scene. A lot of more traditional painters, *plein air* painters, will go outside and make oil or acrylic sketches or watercolours. I do that occasionally but I find the logistics of painting outdoors, mixing paints and carrying all the gear, a bit of a nightmare. In the studio I don't have the colour in front of me but I have a memory, a feeling of a place which is what I want to recreate for the viewer. I want it to be quite specific. But then I'm interested in the drama of the image, so often I'll heighten the light and the shadow, I'll turn up the volume in terms of the colour, and as I'm involved in the intricacies of the painting I'm thinking about how two colours work together. I spend hours mixing colours – they never come out of the tube and on to the canvas. But I do feel a tremendous liberty to invent.

**KI** It seems to me that you relish that freedom and that's the point – that a sketch provides the foundation but a lot more is coming from your imagination.

**AB** I work on a kind of principle that I want to take the colour to a hinterland between reality and imagination, so that it's just *about* believable. Some paintings have a red sky, which is effectively the ground I often use, but it's somehow believable that there could be a red sky even if it's not what you would expect. On the other hand I'm careful not to use bright pinks, greens and purples, so that the scene becomes a cartoon with no relationship to the actuality.

**KI** I hadn't thought about it before, but this is probably why your paintings appeal to me so much. Certainly as a writer I like to work exactly in that area. If you push it too far it becomes something too abstract. The thing is recognisable, but you've pushed it slightly beyond what can be possible. We've talked about colour, but there's another very strong aspect to your work that moves it in the same direction, this 'hinterland' of what is physically possible, and that's to do with the perspective lines. Your paintings, once again in a very subtle way, distort angles. Your buildings are often at impossible angles, and you are often taking very sleek architecture, huge sky-



Andrew Burgess, *Downtown Boston*, 2000, oil on canvas, 142.2 × 132 cm

scrapers, say, that we know behave according to the rules of perspective, and yet when you get up high and you see these buildings together they're subtly wonky. It's not quite right and you know it's not quite right. It's not exactly like a dreamscape but the lines are just slightly off and it produces a very striking effect. A road that sweeps around some tower blocks will be at a crazy, impossible angle. From the sketch to the painting somewhere you introduce these odd lines.

**AB** That's often there in the original drawing. The drawings are very energetic and emotional for me; that's when my engagement with the place is really being expressed. I don't draw a place unless I really feel, wow! this is exciting and dramatic. I have to build up to a pitch of intensity, so that the first drawings in a day might be terribly dull, and I won't use them. But the third or fourth might be the one where I really let the cat out of the bag; they become a flurry of lines, and very obsessive in their detail or the delineation of a space.

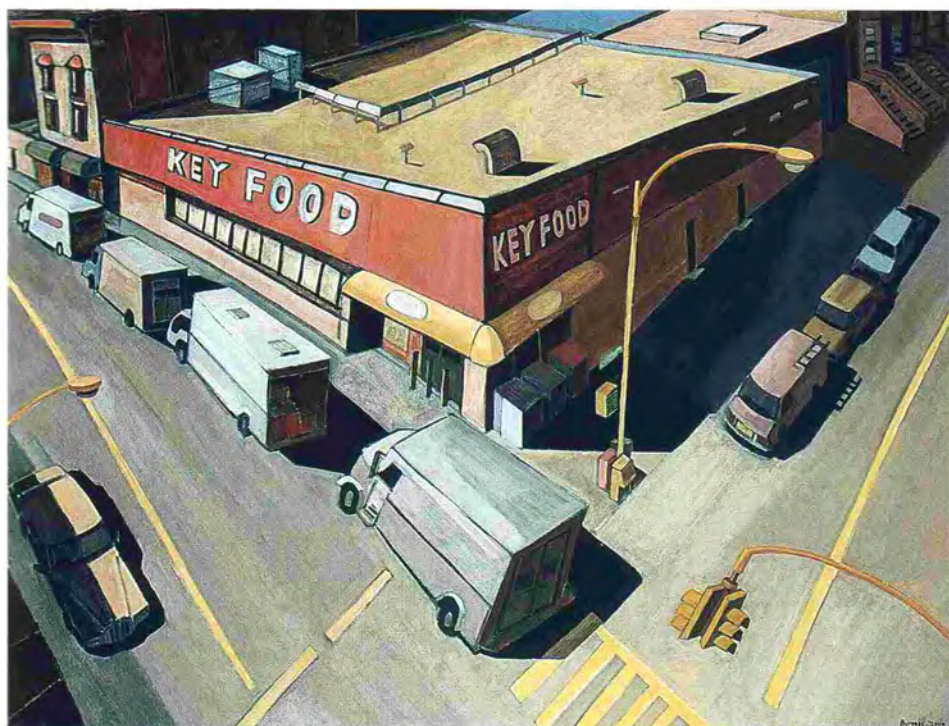
Most painters will tell you that it's a difficult thing to translate drawings into paintings – maintaining the energy and spontaneity. I'd say that most paintings fall short of the drawing in this respect. But of course the painting can become something else, and you can improve other qualities that aren't in the drawing. On occasions I will literally attempt to transcribe the drawing with all the lines onto the canvas as accurately as I can without using any technical devices – it's important to me that

everything I do is by eye, which is why lines are wobbly and so on.

**KI** The lines are a kind of scaffolding?

**AB** Yes, they are – it's the way I construct the painting and also keep the energy of the drawing. But on another level, in terms of how one views a panorama, inevitably the eye and mind can't take in a huge sweep of cityscape in one go, so if I try and do that in the drawing the periphery of the vision does distort lines and bend things, and especially if you're not only going from far left to far right but also looking out of a 24th-storey window onto the ground below and away to the horizon point, such as in the big *Downtown Boston* painting.

**KI** This is what I've been wondering for some time about your work; it's similar to movie makers who veer away from realism, or novelists who do the same. To what extent are you actually conscious that you've deviated from the hard, physical reality of what's out there? Or is it that you see things that way so you're not really conscious of being that eccentric with your angles and your colours? It's like with a lot of people with strong visions, or if you take an analogy with eccentrics: genuine eccentrics often aren't aware of the fact that they're eccentric, they're just trying hard to be normal, but they come out a certain way. I'm not suggesting your style is eccentric, but you have a very strong vision that unifies all your work. Do you feel yourself that you're being fairly normal or are you conscious of distorting things?



Andrew Burgess, *Key Food, Brooklyn, II*, 2000, oil on canvas, 91.4 × 122 cm

**AB** I'm never totally aware of how I'm representing a place – but the viewer will tell me how odd or strange it is. Sometimes it's more extreme than I'm aware of.

**KI** This is the impression I've had, going to your studio a few times, and talking to you about the pictures. In a way it's encouraging, it shows that these impulses are very natural, it's a natural voice rather than something you've manufactured out of theory. There's a very strong Andy Burgess vision.

**AB** I think that voice is becoming clearer now; the more I concentrate on a particular theme. As a young artist, going through art school, you are encouraged, perhaps a little too much, to experiment with all different types of media and styles and ideas about the nature of art, and what artists should be doing now – and it's difficult to find a voice because you're too busy taking on these ideas, or making art about art, or about what's possible today. It takes a few years away from art college to settle down and ask, well, what interests me in the world when I'm walking around looking at things? What takes my fancy? I'm less concerned with what's possible in painting in the year 2000, or how painting should be responding to all previous painting. I'm less anxious about that now. I'm more concerned with what really interests me visually and how I can represent that.

**KI** I feel an absolute parallel there. I studied English Literature at university and in fact I did a creative writing MA, and certainly at that stage you are very much encouraged to think in terms of the history of your art form. It's very easy unless you have a strong sense of identity to come away thinking that the whole point of writing or painting or whatever is to enter into some sort of debate with the ongoing history of ideas about that art form. And I do come across youngish writers, and not so youngish writers, who set about writing a certain way simply because they feel historically that this is the way writing has to go; in a post-Joycean environment

they have to do this, and there is something almost ethically or politically wrong with writing in some other way.

**AB** You can be accused of being a reactionary if you are not painting in a fashionable way.

**KI** I could never quite work out the reasoning behind that – as if somehow you are adding to the excesses of capitalism by writing in a certain kind of way, usually a representational, or realist way.

**AB** Or maintaining the *status quo* when the job of the artist should be to subvert.

**KI** This question of 'the job of the artist' or 'the job of the writer' comes up a lot when you're in an educational environment, but it's very important to come away from that and, as you say, ask yourself what your own relationship is to your art.

**AB** At the end of the day, yes it's important to be conscious of your style and the way you are using the language of painting, but if you don't have something to say, if you don't have a personal sensibility, then forget it. You can't make that up and you can't assume it politically or ideologically. It has to be something that comes from within. One of the things that John Berger has written about so wonderfully is that the specialness of painting is this intense engagement between the artist and the subject, and in this engagement, or conflict or struggle or whatever you want to call it, something new and unknown will emerge and that's where things get interesting, in that dialogue.

Actually, too, it's about how you want to approach a subject on any particular day. It's not an either/or situation – which is unfortunately the way the art world is posited ideologically. I think there's room enough for all different types of art to be made – it shouldn't be one type at the expense of another. I don't see why still-life painting should be any more out of date than a grid painting or an installation. We still look at flowers and still find them beautiful.

**KI** You don't seem to have any strong prejudices against any genre, and in fact there are elements of all of these things coming into your paintings. One or two come close to being traditional still lifes although the subject matter tends to be the tops of skylights on a roof, or stoplights. With one of the paintings I have – the triptych of Atlanta, Georgia – and the terrific new one of the Dome divided into four sections, you're moving towards a more abstract vision. But I always feel you're not dogmatic at all – you're happy using whatever is suitable at that moment. And there is an element of something cartoon-like in some of your work, particularly in the American paintings – almost like those American comics, the Marvel and DC comics. Are you conscious of that?

**AB** Yes. Perhaps I look at the city in a child-like way, in the sense that some paintings may be dark and moody, but many have bright colour and intense sunlight. I'll pick out some details that become symbolic of that area rather than cluttering up the painting with minutiae. The American cartoonist Robert Crumb was wonderful.

He would go out and draw all the thousands of things that clutter up the streets, all the lights and telegraph poles and garbage cans. I didn't want to do that, but picking out a particular detail, a single stop-light that swings across the painting, can give a strong sense of that place. In a painting of Brooklyn I included one shop sign, the 'Key Food' supermarket, which is a little humorous. People from Brooklyn will look at the painting and even though it's simplified, abstracted and cartoony, devoid of all the people and clutter, they'll say 'wow, it really feels like Brooklyn'.

**KI** But it has to be the right thing, and then it fills the whole scene up. Another subtle way in which you deviate from reality is the light in your paintings. Often there are these shadows, but they are impossible, unless there are at least two or three suns, or the sun is behaving in a very eccentric way that day and has decided to bend its rays around in odd ways. Of course, if it were an interior you would assume that there were several light sources, but because we are usually talking about cityscapes, often in the daylight, this creates quite a strange, unnerving effect. But it's achieved very subtly with little bits of shadow here and there, so it's difficult to put your finger on why it's so strongly your vision. I can imagine people from Brooklyn recognising it in the paintings. I live in London and your London paintings I can recognise absolutely at that very straightforward level as being London, but at the same time you know that it's all different, it's veering towards something else – not quite abstract, not quite a dream version of those places but somewhere in that hinterland. You are entering into a very strong imaginative reinterpretation of these places that you nevertheless recognise, and those odd shadows are another part of it. Was this a deliberate device that you hit upon or did you just find yourself doing it?

**AB** I kind of hit upon it. I started to realise that often I might be drawing and it might be dull weather but when I came to invent the painting I could create a much more effective drama if I exaggerated this

chiaroscuro effect, so I started to include a stronger, more powerful, direct sunlight onto the sides of certain buildings and then very dark shadows behind them. I want the painting to make sense more than I want the place to make sense, so I'll include a shadow if and when it suits the abstract quality of that part of the painting. Where it doesn't suit my purposes I might bend it round or leave it out and that does create a slightly odd, slightly surreal effect.

**KI** While we've been talking I can see that there are these vast areas where the painting is left open to your imaginative reinterpretation. You have to have a strong base to your vision to know to what end you are distorting things.

**AB** When I've heard you talk about your writing, and how you do your research into particular places or communities of people, you've said quite simply that much of the research takes place in your head – you don't spend hours in libraries, looking up old documents or photographs, it's actually a question of inhabiting a space and making it real. I suppose I'm doing a kind of equivalent thing – taking a certain amount of information after which I'm at liberty to flesh it out from my imagination.

**KI** Yes, absolutely, I saw that equivalence straight away earlier on in the conversation when you were talking about your sketches and what you did to them. There might be a rough analogy between the relationship of your paintings to, say, photography, and the relationship of the kind of novels I write to journalism. I have a different sense of obligation to what is out there. I'm not asking people to come and read my stuff in order to literally find out what it's like to live in a certain place at a certain time. There are scholars and historians and journalists who can do that according to certain disciplines, complete with bibliographies and footnotes, in a more trustworthy and reliable way. I'm very conscious that I use history and places for my own means. I location-hunt to a certain extent to express what I want to express. It's about the stuff that's inside. I'm looking for places that might help bring it out. I'll only go so far in taking poetic licence, but I *will* take quite a lot of licence.

When you go to somewhere like Perugia, have you chosen this place quite carefully as a location that would somehow reflect something that's going on inside of you – or is it much more random than that?

**AB** Well, I'd never been to Perugia before, but when I got there it was an absolute dream. There are certain places that seem like they're made for me. Perugia is a very vertical kind of place: the old town is on a hill so there are steep inclines, and there are these old Etruscan walls and aqueducts, so the whole place is vertiginous. You are either looking up or looking down, and it has a very cramped, claustrophobic feel and a drama that is almost medieval – because places like Perugia and Siena haven't changed in hundreds of years. There aren't any modern buildings in the old town – it's all as it was. But when I turned up in Assisi, with its wonderful cathedral and the fort on the hill, there was nothing there that suited my purposes. It was too spread out. There was too much countryside, so I ended

up not doing anything in Assisi whereas I did lots of interesting drawing in Perugia.

**KI** When I first met you, you had just finished the American paintings, and I was slightly concerned when I heard that you were going to Italy, because there are so many beautiful things in Italy, so many obviously beautiful buildings and squares and statues and so on; the country's a whole treasure house of great classical art. I was worried that the tension that existed between the American street scenes, the stop-lights and trash cans, and how you dealt with them, wouldn't be there when you went to Italy because the place is so obviously arty anyway. But you did seem to avoid the obvious places, and it's still very much Andy Burgess again – clusters of roofs seen from a great height, and the strange light on the surfaces of buildings – all that clutter and the peculiar lack of people. Did you surprise yourself perhaps by finding a different Italy to the one you went to find? Do you go to places with a strong image already in your head?

**AB** I have a very strong dream life of places rather than people. Often landscapes in my dreams are a mixture of places, and I find myself walking around these quite eerie deserted cities and not being able to locate myself. For instance, up until very recently I'd never visited Birmingham, but I had had this intense dream of the city centre, maybe from something I'd seen on TV, but it was denuded of people and I was lost among these imposing buildings and strange pedestrian walkways. When I went to Birmingham it actually resembled my dream quite closely – there are these big squares and arcades leading from one square to another.

**KI** I know it well, because that's where the Waterstone's is where I have to do events!

**AB** There's definitely this inner city desolation, which intrigues me. I wouldn't say that I'm painting my dreams but possibly some of the dreams inform the paintings. I've recently done some drawings of invented landscapes, collaging images of places I've seen and some from magazines, generally of contemporary architecture, but I haven't painted from them yet. I don't feel comfortable inventing an entire cityscape.

**KI** That's an interesting idea. Do you think

you would dare to take a well-known landmark and change it or put, say, King's Cross station next to St Paul's Cathedral? Would you go that far in distorting things – if there was a purpose to it?

**AB** Well, I'd probably be consciously attempting to create a surreal or hyperreal environment and that might then detract from the original intent of sitting in a place and drawing. It would be a totally different thing. I'm more likely to mix and match different architectural features for the abstract qualities – I'm interested in painting as a collection of shapes and forms and colours on a canvas. I probably won't go down a more psychological road.

But in a way I think that the most interesting thing about the relationship between a work of art and the initial intention is the kind of slippage or gap between the two. Few artists can say 'I want to do exactly this' and then do it. There is usually some degree of slippage or error or meandering and that's where it becomes interesting – and it works in the same way for the viewer as well.

**KI** I'd like to move on to talk about the overall mood of your pictures – once again I think it's something that you're probably not that aware of. The paintings are very exuberant and celebratory but not in a bland or picturesque way. They are also very quirky and individualistic and doing adventurous things with one's view of the world.

Although you've said that you evoke dark things, it never feels that dark, it's dark only within your terms – actually your paintings are very easy to live with. In a practical sense it seems to me that to own a painting is quite a public thing. If I hang one of your paintings over my dining-room table, everyone who drops in here will see it. I might be the kind of person who quite enjoys reading novels about serial killers or dark Dostoyevskian nightmares, but I may not necessarily want the equivalent on my walls. Somebody who loves David Lynch movies and is a great fan of *Crime and Punishment* might not necessarily choose to have the visual equivalent above the dining-room table. If you want to sell paintings, I guess you have to sell to a very public part of a person. To put it simply, most people like



Andrew Burgess, *The Millennium Dome*, 2000, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 127 cm



Andrew Burgess, *Arezzo, Tuscany*, 1999, oil on canvas, 58.4 × 83.8 cm

to buy paintings they and their friends and relatives can live with, regardless of what they think is or is not profound. Do you feel these forces affecting the way you paint?

**AB** Well, it's quite apposite at the moment with all this 'neurotic realist' art about – there are lots of paintings, whether of Myra Hindley or Jenny Saville's massive fat women tied up with string looking like corpses – some of those paintings are fantastic – but I want to make paintings that I would put on my wall. I'm into paintings being interesting but also beautiful things, as long as the ideas don't overwhelm the picture, because once that happens you may as well write it rather than paint it. Paintings can appeal intellectually and cerebrally but significantly they appeal on a visual level. So I'm happy to make paintings that are attractive and that people will buy.

**KI** As a person you have a very light, exuberant optimistic presence about you, so you probably don't have to strain to produce paintings that are like that. You're not the stereotypical moody broody artist. And it's easy for people to find a way into your pictures, they're accessible but also challenging.

**AB** On a literal level, I often start by focusing on something in the foreground, very close to me, and then working backwards into the distance, and there is often a path or a bridge that leads the eye through the painting.

**KI** Yes, people can literally enter the paintings, the eye is guided in, but I meant at a more metaphorical level. I suppose it's that interesting synthesis between the real and the abstract. People can recognise something straightaway, but then the next moment you realise lots of odd things are happening – are these buildings really bending around? Does that hill really rise that steeply? Why is the sky that copper red?

**AB** I was interested, reading your new novel, *When We Were Orphans*, that the long passage of description towards the end of the book, a very surreal description

of this appallingly obliterated area of Shanghai, where the characters go on a journey through tunnels of derelict housing and debris – it felt to me that there was some coincidence in the way that we both invent these areas.

**KI** Maybe it's because I've been looking at your paintings so often while I was writing the stuff!

**AB** Well, it's interesting to take people into a whole invented realm of the city. I don't know if you see a relationship.

**KI** There are parallels with the physical descriptions, but I think that using something quite familiar as a point from which the viewer or reader can take off, and then pushing into something more adventurous, is something I favour. The last part – the controversial part – of Stanley Kubrik's *2001 A Space Odyssey*, when the astronaut goes off into Jupiter, you end up with something like fifteen minutes of pure avant-garde experimental film-making, just weird images on the screen; but because it's been contextualised, built very solidly around this space mission, the viewer's imagination has something to work on. You have this idea that this guy is physically going off towards Jupiter but possibly his eyes and vision are being distorted. But it moves very smoothly from a conventional spacecape as the pod drifts off, and then these strange images start to appear, you enter this strange film world. I think it's very skilful the way a piece of experimental abstract film-making has been put into a mainstream movie. Of course, some people don't like that last passage, but it seems to me that there are ways you can put in some pretty challenging stuff if you actually start from a base people can take off from. Then they do find it an interesting journey rather than just being confronted with something strange and alien.

One other thing I was going to ask you, drawing these parallels again – if I publish a novel, I'm selling copies of it, but I don't lose it to the person who buys it. And that's

the same with a movie-maker or a songwriter. It seems to me a peculiarly poignant situation that you're in. You paint something and to some extent the more successful it is the more likely you are to actually lose it. I've bought a number of your paintings and I'm very conscious that I've taken them away from you. When you came back from Italy, I was so anxious to see what you were working on and get the pick of them that Lorna and I rushed into your studio when the paint was literally not dry – and you probably didn't have time to have any sort of relationship with those pictures. And I think they're two of your best paintings. I whipped them away the moment you finished them.

**AB** It's like stealing my babies!

**KI** Well, exactly – this must be a strange, emotional situation. To draw that analogy seriously, it must be like the paradox of parenting: you're bringing up children to be independent if you are a good parent, you're preparing them for the day that they leave you. But in your case it happens in a very rapid way.

**AB** Well, I carry round photographs in my wallet.

**KI** That's terribly sad isn't it – don't you find that a very difficult thing?

**AB** I don't find it easy. The funny thing is, people who come to buy paintings are usually very clever, and the best ones always go first. But intellectually I know that I have to sell paintings to survive, and then there's the buzz of making a sale. It's a tremendous feeling to be paid for something I've painted, to have the validation that somebody wants that work of art and will actually pay money for it.

But I can't let go of the drawings. They are, in a more fundamental way, irreplaceable. I might do two or three paintings from a drawing or set of drawings. But the drawing is part of me – the sketchbooks are like a visual diary of my life and travels. □