

Painting at the Royal Veterinary College

Immediately upon starting in September 2013, being at the Royal Veterinary College was a fantastic, eye-opening experience. During the time I have been in post, I've been fortunate enough to have been shown all over the College, introduced to every department, facility and institute and met many brilliant people doing fascinating work. The breadth of activity at the College is such that each individual area of study would provide enough ideas for a year of a residency by itself and with such a huge amount to draw upon, the most challenging aspects of making artwork here has been what to focus upon.

One of the key outputs of this residency project was to produce four paintings that explore the 'Life of the College in the 21st Century'. Looking at the world of the contemporary College and how that might be expressed, also meant the rich history as well as the future of the college were relevant for context so there is plenty of reference to the college outside of this period too. In fact, I was keen to represent as broad a cross-section of the College as I could, so that I could refer to the breadth of veterinary education and practice, the life of the students, the work of the teaching staff and also the range of support roles that comprise the College as a whole.

I have tried to incorporate common themes across the breadth of College activity as well as focus on some specific aspects that resonated with me particularly strongly. It might seem strange to do a residency at the RVC and then not really feature animals in the paintings. Apart from the microscopic fauna, a tortoise seems to be the only real animal, but even this is a painting of a digital model from a CT scan of an animal, so actually quite far from life. The decision to avoid direct reference to the obvious subject of the RVC was one largely due to the sheer omnipresence of such imagery already, and also the sheer variety, from which it might not be possible to easily select representatives. For the same reason, rather than focus on one or two specific occupations, I wanted to include elements that could refer to any number of roles and activities. I hope that this approach has made the paintings more relevant to the widest range of people at the College, and made them more enigmatic, suggestive and thought provoking. There has been a great amount of interest in the paintings and many comments from people coming into the studio for a sneak preview before they were finished or seeing progress photos posted onto social media. I have detailed the four works below:



LABCOAT - 2014 - Oil on canvas - 120x150cm

I've been told that when people put on a lab coat, they behave more like scientists. In fact, when RVC works with school children, they encourage them to put on labcoats to see how they feel. It is important for young people to physically 'step into' the identity of a role, sometimes seen as privileged or difficult to access, in order to aspire to it. As these coats are worn in different areas of the College, for different tasks, they indicate that 'science' is being done, whether by a student, an instructor or a researcher. There's a uniformity that is recognisable across disciplines; this could be a medic's coat as easily as a vet's, particularly with the stethoscope. It is this commonality that underscores the 'One Health' objective of the College.



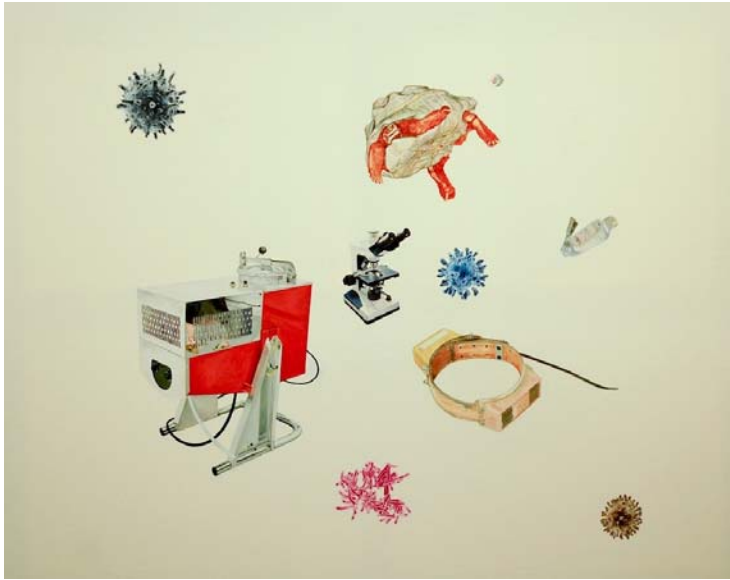
TIGER ONESIE - 2014 - Oil on canvas - 120x150cm

Students in their 3rd year BVet Med course have a lecture halfway through the year, and thus midway through their whole course. It's a tradition to go to this particular lecture in pajamas, which these days inevitably includes onesies. Animal fancy dress is also very popular throughout the College calendar and there are some nice photos of students in the archives dressing up as animals as early as the 1930's. I thought the image of an animal print onesie would be an ideal tribute to the non-academic aspect of life for the students, always obsessed with animals, even when off duty. I tried to reference the shape of a tiger-skin rug in this image to bring to mind the various treatments of exotic and endangered animals with reference to historical and cultural approaches to conservation.



WELLIES - 2014 - Oil on canvas - 150x120cm

When I asked students and staff for their ideas about what they felt represented their experience of the College, someone suggested a pair of Wellies. I thought that this was a perfect symbol for what people imagine when they think of a vet; a James Herriot type, with a check shirt and muddy corduroy trousers. There is certainly something earthy and fundamental about the Wellington boot and they are used for all sorts of practice at the RVC. It seems like there is a different pair of rubber boots for every different department and activity, not only academic. I got a lot of them together for this image to show the breadth of practice and as a reminder of the muckier side of things. I also thought that all their colours would look great together. I had to reassure some sharp-eyed students and staff, who'd noticed that I had placed a pair of sterile dissection room wellies amongst the other, less clean boots, that was some artistic licence in this regard.



CONSTELLATION - 2014 - Oil on canvas - 150x120cm

In counterpoint to the earthy, mucky 'Wellington boot' aspect of Veterinary Science I concentrated in this painting on elements that I felt counter-balanced this traditional image of veterinary practice. Many of these things happening at RVC I was surprised and impressed to see. The degree of technology and cutting edge research that the RVC is involved with in the various laboratories, the Queen Mother Animal Hospital, the Equine Hospital, the 'Plastination' Suite and the Structure and Motion Lab were fantastic sources of visual information. This canvas is a constellation of those things that concern Veterinary Practice in the 21st Century, from the microscopic, to the digital and electronic.

As well as the four paintings for the college, there were a number of other paintings, drawings and sketches produced during the past year of subjects including the animals and specimens, people and equipment at the college. A selection of these alongside the four large canvases were shown at the end of the term, on 15th July. Students, staff and other people from outside the RVC were invited to the unveiling.

College Staff and Student Engagement:

During the year, I have run 15 drawing and painting workshops for the students and staff. Around 100 participants from all levels of artistic ability were able to attend and learnt about drawing and painting from still life (specimens from the College) as well as from live animals. The workshops were lots of fun and the feedback from these was excellent. It was a rare opportunity for the students and staff to be able to look at their subject matter in a new, perhaps less demanding way. Some students mentioned that this practice helped them with their anatomical understanding, while others reported that they felt less anxious and self-conscious about drawing afterwards. Some of the work was great and we were able to show results at the same exhibition as the four main canvases for the College.

As well as during the workshops, I made sure students and staff were aware that I was accessible for advice and opinion about artwork at any time they might bump into me around the college. I also invited the college students, staff and visitors to be able to engage as much in my work as I did in theirs, so I made sure that I kept an open-door policy when I was working in my studio. I kept regular hours in the studio at Camden campus and I met many visitors in this way and had some great conversations about our respective work.



Student drawing workshop in 2013

Public Engagement:

Public engagement is an important part of the activity of the College and I was pleased to be able to participate in a number of events as part of the residency, with various open days and events, which brought new visitors to the College and gave them access to an aspect to the RVC they may not have expected.

Throughout the year, there have been four other College Late Openings for the general public to attend at which I was able to participate by opening my studio and holding drawing workshops for visitors. On Feb 20th 2014, there was a very busy Open Studio event to which more than 50 members of the public as well as students and staff came. Visitors were able to look at work in progress, meet and chat about the art as well as gain access to the College museum and other areas.

As well as the activities within the college, the Residency was featured in Veterinary Record (twice) and Times Higher Education magazine. In October 2014 I will show work completed while at the RVC in a joint exhibition with wildlife illustrator John Gale at the Royal College of Pathologists organised by Prof. Cheryl Scudamore (from MRC and ex of RVC).

Legacy Benefit to RVC and the Artist:

During the course of the Residency, I have met many individuals with whom I will continue to communicate with and share ideas. A number of individual staff and departments have approached me over the past year to discuss possible ongoing professional collaborations on projects that could benefit from artistic input, from publication illustration to model making and concepts for communication.

Due to the value of drawing workshops in terms of assisting the students with their anatomy and general visualisation skills, I submitted a successful application to the Animal Care Trust and have been granted project funding to develop the RVC Gateway and BSc Year One curriculum to include greater amount of visual information as well as opportunity for students to practice drawing.

I have made all the paintings and drawings completed during the time of the Residency available to be used in reproduction without copyright restrictions as fundraising tool for the College and the Animal Care Trust to use in greetings cards and postcards.

I am thoroughly thankful to the RVC for their support and openness to an artist being in their midst. I was met with wholehearted enthusiasm to hear about and look at my work as well as an overwhelming positivity towards being involved in art workshops and discussing their work in the context of art.

I am also extremely grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for financing this post and am appreciative of the work that the Trust is doing in order to fund art and science collaboration.