

A Ferrari through India

Joy Parker





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Interview with Joy Parker, September 2018.

A.M. : Your exhibition was called *A Ferrari Through India*, and that seems to have puzzled some people, but I believe it has something to do with Indian rickshaws.

Joy Parker : Yes that is correct. In Indian towns and cities, most travel in a three-wheeled vehicle called a rickshaw, which is usually automated, but sometimes pulled along by a man on a bike or or a man running and what the driver or the puller would say to us with wicked humour is "step into my Ferrari".

A.M. : Some people did not get the irony of the title. I understand you were actually born in India.

Joy Parker : My parents were missionaries. They had met in India and had five children, so that was where I was born and spent the first six and a half years of my life. They proved to be quite formative especially in terms of my art.

A.M. : Your family came back to Britain while you were still quite young.

Joy Parker : I moved to Birmingham when I was six and a half or seven.

A.M. : So did you remember much of your life in India? Did you hanker after it and feel you wanted to return?

Joy Parker : I definitely wanted to return, but for various reasons, especially lack of money, I did not get back until I was thirty. It has always been a significant part of my life, and I do remember a lot from it.

A.M. : How did you start working with art? Did you find that interest early in your life, or did you go through a process of later discovery?

Joy Parker : As a child, I always liked drawing, especially peoples' faces. At school, I loved writing stories and illustrating them. I was very critical of myself, and I would think, that's not good enough, I haven't got the perspective right. When I went to secondary school, I got a B minus for Art, so that put me off at the age of 13. I remember we had to draw a tin can, and I just wasn't interested in that.

A.M. : So you had a great interest in storytelling. What I take from your exhibition is that your artworks are telling stories.

Joy Parker : It is about capturing a moment in time that has various levels and with *A Ferrari Through India*, I tried to bring in a different level by working with my husband Robert, who is a writer. So it was a moment in time, caught from different perspectives, not only visual as he brought in the medium of words, which might illuminate or contradict the visuals.

A.M. : So, did your husband, Robert, actually collaborate with you, working together on some projects, or was he more of an external influence?

Joy Parker : The series *A Ferrari Through India* was a complete collaboration between Robert and myself and we set out at the beginning to work together. We were not sure how this was to happen, but we knew it would be words and images. I would comment on his words and he would on my images.

A.M. : So, there should be subtitle 'In collaboration with Robert Leach'. Did you get funding to travel to India or did you have to finance your trip yourselves?

Joy Parker : I had two residences, one in South India and another in Delhi. In both cases, I contributed financially so that Indian artists who did not have the necessary resources could get free residencies. They were both great experiences, and I worked alongside Indian artists, and my eyes were opened.

When I was 30 I had just completed my art degree, and now I was working alongside a performance artist, an installation artist, a conceptual artist and one man who was doing narrative paintings; so it was very interesting to see how India was operating on very similar lines to Britain.

A.M. : I understand that your *A Ferrari through India* series was done in 2008 and you spent 6 months there.

Joy Parker : Yes, in 2008 we went there for 6 months and the first couple of months we were in Kochi, Kerala where I had my first residency, just because I found the place and got on with the people there, so they offered me a studio to work in, but I had already organised the residency in Delhi with Lalik Kala Academy which has studios all over India. Then we stayed in a flat in an ordinary part of Delhi, and I used to go to my studio while Robert went off exploring the Moghul tombs of Delhi.

A.M. : So you came back with a load of ideas and a number of completed works, I suppose.

Joy Parker : I had some completed works. I was able to create an etching as the Academy in Delhi had very good printing facilities, so I learnt the very elaborate process of etching and made a few prints. I did a few paintings while in Delhi too, but when I came back, I finished off the whole series. I had a sketchbook, and I had worked out what the images and words should be, and when I came back, I just had to paint them which took a little while.

A.M. : So you have exhibited this series a few times?

Joy Parker : Yes. When we came back to Selkirk, where I live at the moment, we had an exhibition, then we took it to Birmingham, as that was where I grew up, and I have also taken it to Lincoln. So it got a lot of interest. My art at that time was not especially commercial, it was more about wanting to make art and show it.

A.M. : When did you create your oil paintings? They are quite different in conception to the other work.

Joy Parker : I have one up on my living room wall at the moment, and it is dated 2004. I had gone back to college and did an M.A. I had done art degrees much later in life. Mostly in my first degree, I had done sculpture but when I went back I did painting as at that time I did not have the space for sculpture. I loved Russian Constructivist art, and I tried to combine the figure with its constructed environment, trying to bring the figure back into modernism. Later I did a series of comic paintings, I would just see a situation and try and communicate the psychological reality behind that. It would be slightly cartoon-like, I would be exaggerating certain features to make the viewer aware of what I was trying to say. I wanted them to be colourful and humorous. They usually just arose out of a moment where you just say 'Ah, that would make a good painting.'

A.M. : I understand you have moved on to different media now.

Joy Parker : At present, I am mostly doing mosaic, but I have been doing that for almost twenty years. Around the time of my first visit to India I used all sorts of media, including installation with brooms and strings, sculptures, paintings and mosaics. I made an installation with piles of shoes, because outside of temples you had to take off your shoes, so I made an artwork out of this. On the wall were mosaics of some of the beautiful birds of India, having been inspired by the technique of inlaid marble of such buildings as the Taj Mahal. So fifteen to twenty years ago I was making mosaics of birds. I just taught myself how to do it. I wanted to show a range of works, some which were easily accessible and for sale and others that were more complex. Recently, mosaics have taken on a much more significant role in my career.

A.M. : There must be a large amount of work and time involved in creating a large mosaic. You have to have the will power to work on it. It will require a lot of hard graft.

Joy Parker : It is more physical hard work, but I like the physicality of it. I loved sculpture but wanted to introduce more colour. I was interested in the fact that Greek and Roman sculptures, now white, were actually once painted! Mosaic, for me, combines the physicality of sculpture and the colour of painting. I have also always been interested in architecture, and mosaics are ideal for becoming integral to buildings both inside and out.

A.M. : Do you like doing flat mosaics, or do you prefer working in the third dimension?

Joy Parker : I like doing both. I like the colour I get from the tiles as they are usually bright, but there is also a three-dimensionality to even the two-dimensional mosaics. So for example, I am working on a 2D mosaic of Our Lady, for St Catherine Labourer Church in Glasgow, but each piece I cut is a really chunky bit of glass and the whole work has a life to it beyond 2D as it reflects the changing light.

A.M. : Have you ever thought of working in the medium of stained glass?

Joy Parker : No. I was thinking about it even today when I was looking at some beautiful church stained glass which I do like, but I think I like to just work with very basic materials without complicated cutting and melting. There is something nitty-gritty and physical about creating mosaics, and I like using cement, for some strange reason!

A.M. : One of the series which you put up on one of the walls that really intrigued people was the Mister Jog series.

Joy Parker : This was from my third visit.

A.M. : I had, from you, a little bit of the story behind it and I would tell people just to give them a guide into that series, and as soon as they got the idea it really took off for them, and they would go along talking about the different characters and the things that appeared.

Joy Parker : I was intrigued by the person who used to sit behind the desk at this hostel we stayed in for several weeks. It was called the 'Best Inn' but it was very basic. There was this man behind the desk. He was there almost all the time and didn't seem to have any other life. He was quite small, shy but very polite. The way he sat was so low that all you could see was his spectacles above the desk. Robert wrote a little poem about him. We were forever passing by him, and I took to imagining all the different people who would have come into the hostel, and as my imagination took my fancy, it was not just real people like a back-packer, but a dancer, or Shiva as a female, and other Indian gods. I was also exploring flat formalism in the paintings, as I was then being inspired by Indian folk art, but I was also interested in the fact that it was similar to medieval western art with borders and flat colours and outlined forms. Gender has always been a preoccupation of mine, so I was interested in bringing in characters that were wearing costumes from a different era and were suggesting a different gender but relating back and forward between India and the West. So there was more than one thing being played out. Some of the characters were purely imaginative, so even a tiger comes to visit.

A.M. : You had eight of these in the exhibition, but you told me you had done more in this series.

Joy Parker : There are sixteen in the series. When I was working on *A Ferrari Through India*, I felt I worked very much as an outsider looking into India, but when I came to do the series *At the Best Inn*, I felt more comfortable appropriating some of the styles of Indian folk art, and could use them in conjunction with elements of Western manuscript painting.

A.M. : Many of your paintings have a border, and some interesting things appear in your borders.

Joy Parker : I suppose that is the decorative side of me, which comes out in my mosaics as well. I have been doing mosaics ever since I graduated, but then I was mostly doing birds in quite a realistic way with a decorative border, but there wasn't any deep meaning to these, but my mosaic work has moved on now on beyond that.

A.M. : So what do you plan to do in the future?

Joy Parker : Funnily enough, Robert and I are going back to India in December for two months, and we are planning another collaborative project, perhaps a scroll. Some artwork will come out of it at some point. I envisage that I will still be doing the mosaics. Hopefully the church I am working with will want me to do another mosaic, maybe not next year but the year after. I am also doing community projects. I am shortly going down to London to a mosaic forum to go to a workshop about making community mosaics.

A.M. : You seem to like working collaboratively with others.

Joy Parker : I like time in my studio just making things, but I also do like working with other people, encouraging and sharing, so it is a balance.



































