



A Small World

Mark Rowney's illustrations have appeared on the cover of Penguin books, in the Radio Times, Time magazine and the New York Times. His career has taken him from Paul Smith's Fifth Avenue store to an Indian textiles factory. Now, on the Weardale ranch where he grew up, Mark creates intricate leather books and fantastical paintings inspired by the birds, bees and beauty around him.

Looking back, the essential inspirations for my creativity were the outdoors, nature and the freedom to explore them – all the things I was lucky enough to enjoy as a child.’ Indeed, artist Mark Rowney enjoyed a rather unusual childhood. ‘My parents had a ranch in Weardale – a real American style ranch,’ he explains.

‘They bought a 19th century schoolhouse that needed quite a lot of work, and planned to turn it into a guesthouse with Western riding facilities – my parents were passionate about the American West. They started doing afternoon teas to help fund the renovation, and people asked my mother if she would do evening meals too. Within a year we were serving 300–400 meals a night at the Rancho del Rio. We had some big Country and Western singers coming over from the States to perform, and one year the chief of the Navajo tribe visited – my dad was very interested in Native American jewellery. I had to wear a Confederate uniform and sit on a horse to direct the buses to the car park!’

Mark’s childhood was idyllic. ‘I used to roam the moors from morning till night – my parents could never find me because I was always off drawing trees. I felt as though during the day I had the freedom to explore this wonderful natural world, and in the evening the city came to me. That contrast between nature and the city – both places I find inspiring – has been a constant in my life, and consequently a constant in my art.’

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He did an illustration course at St Martin’s, London, which, though specialising in illustration, offered a broad approach that he found instrumental in developing his work. ‘I loved the foundation year, because it just gave me so many different skills and ways of expressing myself, from acrylics to ink.’ However, he jokes that based on his background, ‘I probably should have been a conceptual artist!’ His whole family came to his degree show in full cowboy regalia – his lecturers thought he’d hired them for the occasion. His talent was spotted immediately: he finished his degree on the Friday and handed in his first piece of work to the Radio Times on the Monday. ‘I’d always loved the post war Radio Times illustrations and it was my dream to work for the magazine. So I was incredibly lucky that their art director was one of the first to look at my work, and the first to offer me a job.’ More illustrating work for other publications followed, along with contracts to produce book covers for Penguin. ‘I enjoyed creating the covers, because it meant I read books I would never have thought to pick up. It made me reassess the way I see things.’

When Mark decided to leave London for New York, he asked the influential art directors he already worked for if they knew anyone who might be interested in his work. He secured interviews on his first day in the city, and within two weeks had freelance jobs on all the best publications, from Time magazine to the New York Times. As he started in mid-November, his first cheque from each publication arrived with an invitation to their Christmas party. ‘It was magical,’ Mark remembers. ‘I’d been in New York less than a month and there I was at the Time Christmas party, rubbing

shoulders with the great and the good in their black tie. I met so many influential people and it worked wonders for my career.’

However, he admits ‘I’m always trying to push the envelope, and constantly challenging myself to keep moving forward with my art. I got to the stage where I didn’t want to work in black and white, and then I didn’t want to do quarter page illustrations – designers would persist in putting type over my beautifully crafted compositions! I eventually talked myself out of wanting to illustrate altogether.’ Around the time he was becoming disillusioned, he went to visit his parents, and found a box full of leather scraps and cutting tools. ‘Every January we’d close the ranch for a month and spend six weeks in Arizona, living on the reservation. That’s where I first saw fantastic tooled leatherwork. They make boots and saddles all across the American West, in very stylised forms, and my dad was always very interested in it, though I don’t remember ever seeing him make anything. That was where the box of tools had come from.’ So Mark started experimenting with carving the leather ‘just to fill in the days. But it was such a beautiful craft, and I hadn’t really seen anyone turn it into an artform.’

Self-taught, he suspects it was his very lack of knowledge about what could be achieved with leather that led him to develop such a unique way of working it, and to use the tools the way he wanted to use them. Even now, he frequently gets emails from other leatherworkers praising his unusual style, which involves carving and shaping one piece of leather to produce a 3D effect – he doesn’t ‘applique’ or otherwise affix smaller scraps of leather to achieve the effect. Back in New York, he steeled himself to tell his art directors that he would no longer be available for illustration work – ‘telling them was the hardest bit’ – and created a collection of leatherwork, from art to accessories, and started to show it to gallery and shop owners around the city. ‘I went into Paul Smith’s Fifth Avenue store and just pulled my work out of a carrier bag. I was delighted when they said that Paul himself would like to see it, and I walked out of there with a job.’

‘I created art in New York for three years, most of it for Paul Smith. I made accessories, paintings, clocks – I was obsessed with traditional American quilts and I even made one of those. They were so good to me, because whatever I made, they’d display in the shop. It was like having my own personal gallery space.’ The work at Paul Smith led to another opportunity, ‘Two ladies had bought a lot of my work. They wanted to start a high end boutique selling embroidered soft furnishings, and they asked me if I’d be interested in working for them. I remember being on the plane to India feverishly reading as many books about embroidery as I could, desperate to seem as though I knew what I was talking about!’ He visited India three times in three years, staying at one point for six months. ‘The work was beautiful, but I found my time in India quite stressful. It’s a country of such contrasts – I saw some wonderful things, but also some terrible sights.’

At the end of the three years, Mark was burnt out. He’d contracted Lyme disease in America, and had been ill in India too. Nostalgic for the sense of creativity he’d felt when he was a child, and the landscape that had inspired him originally, he determined to return to Weardale. In the ten years since he’d moved to New York, he’d only been back to the North East once. About two weeks after he arrived home, he went for a drink in the local pub, where a group of locals asked him what he’d been doing since he’d left. ‘I told them, expecting them to be impressed by the highlights, and there was a pause, then one of them said “Well, that’s all well and good, but have you heard about Peter Thompson catching that five pound sea trout?” I just thought, this is exactly where I want to be.’

Since then, Mark has concentrated on quietly producing work in the studio 15 yards from his back door. ‘If it’s raining my



‘To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower’

William Blake





commute is about three seconds, but on a beautiful day it can take me 20 minutes. It always amazes me how one place can change so much, and how six inches of a summer meadow at night can be as interesting as the grandest panorama of the daytime dale.' Mark's subject matter is the natural world that surrounds him, from the lapwings that nest on the moors outside his studio to the moths that flutter around the farmhouse windows at night. 'I'm fascinated by folklore, especially the fact that because it's very much "of the people", you can make up your own! My piece What Birds Dream is my imagining of a lapwing's life. You pick up modern bird books and they're all based on identification: this is the bird, this is its nest, here are its eggs. But there's a million stories about them, like the way lapwings fight off stoats or sparrowhawks, all the tricks they play to avoid their eggs being stolen. Each kind of bird has those. So I paint the bird to show how it looks but also to tell its story, and I feel as though so many talented artists are missing a trick because they just paint a bluetit on a branch. They don't show it the way they see it.'

His painting *The Strange Effect of Light* depicts huge, exotically marked moths caught in the light flooding from the open doorway of a house. It's reminiscent of the fantastical images of photographer Tim Walker, with the same childlike sense of wonder and a joyous, playful treatment of scale. 'I'm obsessed by contemporary British rural art. I spent three months painting it, putting in 12 to 14 hour days, and I was forever six inches away from it. When I'd finished I stood back and surprised myself – it just seemed to work. It harks back to that childhood memory of seeing something for the first time, like when you go out at night and your eyes adjust, and you realise there's thousands of these creatures out there flying around and you're not aware of them. For me, that was a magical feeling, and I wanted to capture that and hopefully evoke the same feeling in the viewer. I'm always thinking about the image as if I were two foot six, because when a child sees a spider on a cobweb, they're very close to it, and I think they look at it in a different way because of that. So I play around with scale, to emphasise how beautiful these insects are. My work seems to appeal to both men and women: it's not pretty-pretty, but even people who don't like insects seem to like it. It seems to inhabit a twilight zone.'

Mark's work is divided into acrylic paintings and intricate leather pieces, from panels to books. For his paintings, he does quick thumbnail sketches, then draws lightly onto birch panels, fixing the image in his mind and on the panel. 'It takes time because it's such detailed work, and paint soaks into wood so you need

to underpaint a lot. I can see why so many artists prefer working on canvas in oils – it's much quicker.' It can take him more than three months to complete a piece. For his leatherworking, he uses undyed rawhide, drawing lightly to fix the image. 'I use a swivel knife to cut a furrow, then a bevel tool to flatten down one side. I call it taking a quarter of an inch for a ten mile walk. Once the carving is done, everything is handpainted in acrylics and inks. It takes a very long time – people say they liked the blue leather I used on another piece, but I don't use dyed leather, all the colours are handpainted. Books can take up to 90 hours – they're what supermarkets call a loss leader, but I enjoy doing them. I like to put so much effort in, which is counter-intuitive I suppose in today's manufactured world. When I started I just hoped that if I worked hard enough and well enough, my work would find its own marketplace. In fact, I've had so much interest from my paintings and leatherwork that the books are becoming less common, because I have to question whether I can put that time in – to do so means something else won't be created, and I have so many ideas. So I'm doing a limited edition of ten books a year, and I've found someone who can make wooden boxes for me, which I will cover with gold leaf to make them more beautiful. I'm currently looking at marketing them to the higher end of the market, such as some of the larger London stores.'

He continues to move in new directions, and another project involves beautiful Georgian style panelled doors. 'Although I like putting pieces in frames, to contain the story, I also love breaking out of that mould. So I've found an incredible woodworker who's making beautiful doors, and I'm making leather panels for them. Each door will tell a story, even if it's just the simple story of a bird making its nest. I've got books full of ideas,' he confesses, 'If there were 48 hours in a day I'd get everything that I wanted done. But I have to pick and choose because I know I can't do everything.' Mark's next exhibition, at the Biscuit Factory later in the year, is inspired by his collection of 18th and 19th century silhouettes. 'I look out over the valley and everything I love was built over 200 years ago. I love that sense of continuation. My next show is based on shadows, rainbows, silhouettes and the influences of people on memory.' The end of February saw him exhibiting at Battersea Arts Fair with Artsbank, and he will also be placing some of his new work in The Forge, Allendale's new arts development. 'I don't like to stand still,' he says. 'I'm always nervous about finishing work, because I'm worried that I might dry up, so I've always got at least five or six pieces in progress at once.' As far as we can see, though, Mark has no cause for concern.

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