

Siesta Time, Hania, acrylic, 53 x 34 cm



It's amazing you know, I didn't even think I could sail, and now due to my navigational skills we have landed on the north coast of Crete. At first we didn't know where we were. Vincent and Falstaff rowed ashore to investigate and to see if the natives were friendly. A lady from a big white house approached them and said with a smile 'Kalimera'. Falstaff thought she was offering him octopus and said 'Yes thank you'. She sat them down and brought out a huge plate of sardines and a large bottle of Ouzo. The lady whose name was Helen chatted away happily in Greek while the two adventurers wolfed down the food and polished off the bottle of Ouzo. When it came to standing up Vincent found that his legs wouldn't support him. He asked Falstaff to break him off a small branch of almond blossoms to take back to the ship; he said that it reminded him of his first days in Arles when the blossoms were just beginning to emerge. Eventually Falstaff carried him back with the sprig of almond blossom in one hand and Vincent slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. (The Pirate Papers)

JOHN ELLISON

OF PIRATES
& OTHER THINGS



Falstaff rules OK? watercolour 53x34 cm
(The Pirate Papers)

I understand that when people attend one of my workshops on Art, Creativity and Joy, they expect to be given a convenient mantra for being a joyful, creative, artistic person. However it takes a bit more than that.

After walking down Katoomba Street recently and viewing some of the humans on display, I had the thought that stupidity is really a daily choice on the part of the individual. Correspondingly, I thought, intelligence, grace, refinement, compassion and bravery are also a matter of daily choice. Deep down I think we all realise that, which makes people's daily actions and choices all the more surprising. I suppose many people can't be bothered making the effort. Why should I become intelligent, brave and compassionate when I can more easily be stupid, cowardly and not give a fuck about anything or anybody? After all, people who are intelligent and brave and all that, are a bit up themselves, they think they are better than other people, and nobody likes them anyway.

There's a certain amount of truth in that observation. But I'm inclined to think that life becomes more thrilling when we make more use of our capacities. When the flatworm, who was used to grovelling blindly along the bottom of the ocean, decided to develop the first pair of eyes and a rudimentary brain, then life became more thrilling. When human consciousness blossomed forth in Shakespeare's plays then life became more thrilling. When Nelson Mandela assumed the leadership of his

country after twenty-seven years in prison then life became more thrilling. When you learn how to juggle with your left hand then life becomes more thrilling. But the fact is that to become anything, to achieve anything, to learn anything requires a certain degree of struggle. In the end one would hope it is a joyous struggle – but struggle nevertheless.

Nobody struggled more than poor Vincent. And on the other hand, nobody ever achieved more, in such a short time, as poor Vincent. The struggle seems to have knocked him to pieces; but what delights he must have known along the way, and what glories he left behind for the world.

Be assured that if you take on a creative way of life then you will be engaged in struggle. Initially everything will stand in your way: your family, your friends, the society you live in, all will appear as obstacles and will advise you to turn around and go the other way. And when you have managed to brazenly push through the resistance of others, you will be set upon by the fluttering black bats of self-doubt and despair. The only remedy for this is to be brave. A certain degree of aggressive audacity is the prerequisite for any act of creation. With a certain grim calm, one says "by hook or by crook, this thing will be done" and you do it. When your back is against the wall then nothing can stop you - the very worst thing that can happen is that you will die.



Falstaff models for Vincent, brush and ink, 67x48 cm (The Pirate Papers)

Somebody said to me that I have a crew of quarrelsome hotheads - no equanimity to be found amongst them. Well I had to agree. Allan Ginsberg does prolonged chanting on deck in order to abandon his ego, but he is one of the most egotistical persons I have ever met. These are powerful personalities we are dealing with here: their insistence upon being themselves - and nothing but themselves - is the main part of their genius and vitality. Some of them have the ability to express themselves more gracefully than others; some like Vincent, always seem to be up against it - he's like a Siamese fighting fish. The women, though outnumbered are not at all intimidated by the men - they tend to treat them like children. If someone oversteps the mark - as Dr. Bangler is wont to do - Haystack Harrison or Annie Sprinkle will readily tell him to put a sock in it. Some like Falstaff just overflow with good spirits no matter what's going on. I like them all; confess, I really love them. That is why I have gathered them, and why we are on this voyage together.

But on the other hand there is a strong likelihood that you will live, and live with enormous satisfaction because you will be living in accordance with your own deepest energies and desires. Self-acceptance seems to be the key. We are all endowed with a unique set of wishes, desires, inclinations and fascinations. These passions for certain things to the exclusion of others are the motors that will take us deeper into existence. 'I celebrate myself and sing myself,' said old Walt at the beginning of his great poem. What a rare and jolly attitude to have towards

oneself. And what reason did Walt have to be so pleased with himself anyway? No more reason than you or I. In fact, in the next line he says: 'And what I assume, you shall assume. For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.' Accept yourself totally, completely, absolutely - you are a brand new experiment on the part of nature, an original new viewpoint on the world; so best not to cover it up and take on another's viewpoint because it seems more convenient. What coyness is it that makes us say: 'Don't look at me. I'm an original. You might get a shock.' As Emerson says: 'Adhere to your own act, and congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant and broken the monotony of a decorous age.'

'Lose your mind and come to your senses.' What does this actually mean? It means stop living in your mind as though it constitutes the sole reality in this world. Living in your mind means living in a constant world of fantasy which we justify by the name of thinking. Remembering, planning, speculating, worrying, daydreaming, talking to oneself, arguing with imaginary opponents, inventing non-existent dramas, making comparisons with others, imagining what others are thinking about you, doing crosswords, reading novels, reading the newspaper, listening to the news, trawling the internet, going backwards and forwards and around and around in a never ending cycle. That's us; that's how we are; living inside our heads, and mistaking what's going on inside our heads for reality.

People of course think that if they "lose their minds" then they will cease to exist. "I think therefore I am." Take away thinking and you take away what distinguishes us from the chimpanzees.

To some extent this is true. It would be a retrograde step to stop thinking altogether. However most of us have become so caught up in the process that we have forgotten how to make a more direct contact with the world around us. Instead of experiencing the tangy taste of reality, we look out there and think about it. When we travel we think about what other people will think about us travelling; and we have our pictures taken in front of the Acropolis to show that, like many others, we managed to get there. Who cares about seeing you in front of the Acropolis, did you actually build the thing? Introduce me to the man who made this extravagance and I might be interested, otherwise stop blocking the view. On the other hand, walk up the hill to the Acropolis and spend some time just looking at these temples, these monuments - give yourself up to them, and let them sink into you - and then at a certain point you might feel an extraordinary thing: these crumbling buildings are actually a part of you. The people who made these amazing structures are people like yourself-

with the same yearnings and hopes and struggles – and man, look what they have done. Feel the spirit that animated them as part of your own spirit, because although these people existed three thousand years ago, they are still alive here and now; you are standing in their presence. Then perhaps you may be permitted to have your photo taken in front of the Acropolis and even claim that you were responsible for building it; but not before you have had that experience of connection.

It is the experience of connection that modern man has lost. We need to experience our connection with the universe which is our home; and the best way to do that is to make connection with what is there when you step outside the front door. Here you have the latest production of the universe, right in front of your nose: that tree, that kookaburra, those rosellas fluttering in the grass, took fifteen billion years to get here for your delectation. Listen to that crazy carefree clucking of the kookaburra – that is the universe laughing at you

– laughing with you; laughing at itself. Learn to see the colours, the textures, the patterns of what's around you, because the universe is eager to hear of its own beauty.

Coming to your senses, takes you deep into life itself. You feel it pulse inside you. It is fierce and erotic and passionate and unbelievably joyful. When you open up your senses, you allow newness to come into your soul; you tingle with the experience; you become more alive; your thoughts and feelings begin to circulate in new way. Now I want to talk about the power supply for our creativity, our own spontaneous energy. Henry Miller mentioned a writer friend of his who could never get started on the book he was writing because he was not able to get past the first sentence. For six years he had been wrestling with that first sentence. Now, allowing for Henry's penchant for humorous exaggeration it was obvious that Henry's writer friend was not giving it his best shot. Whatever he had stored up in him, which may have been of great interest to the reading public, was

The Crew, pen and ink, 67 x 48 cm (The Pirate Papers)

*An odd crew when you come to think of it. Five painters, four writers, one post-porn modernist, one art critic, one hoop-dancer, one sexual pervert (or maybe 13, I'm not sure), one human potential expert, two studio assistants, and one gentleman soldier who is as fat as butter. We have only lost one person overboard so far and that was the Michelangelo drawing that caused so much trouble at the Carrington Hotel. An intelligent lot I think you will agree; but we have just discovered that none of us knows how to sail a boat, or a ship, or whatever you call these damned things. As the nominal captain I felt that it reflected badly on me (not being able to sail a boat) so I patiently explained to the crew that we are embarked on a metaphorical journey, not a real one; and that I have been preparing myself by reading Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat* and watching Gregory Peck in *Moby Dick*. Here we are happily united posing for a selfie. Rembrandt's two assistants have gone ashore for more provisions and some wine for Paddy Cavanagh.*



not getting released, because every time he revved up the creative engine he would simultaneously put on the brakes. Allen Ginsberg's remedy for that predicament – a case of severe perfectionism – was to trust your own mind. Just put down whatever comes up. 'First thought, best thought,' he said, and applied that method in his own poetry. We are all bursting with ongoing energy; but we are so distrustful of our own minds and our own essential natures, it's as though we are at war with ourselves. We end up not being able to get past the first sentence, in case some imaginary critic declares that it is not perfect, or even laughs at us.

Similarly when you watch Picasso at work on Cluzoit's film the *Mystery of Picasso*, you see him building up a painting of great beauty and assurance, only to see him change the painting over and over again, perhaps twenty or thirty times, so that the first painting is completely obliterated. Cluzoit the director comments: "We don't want you getting tired" to which Picasso replies: "I can go on all night if you want me to." And you can quite imagine that huge fund of spontaneous energy carrying Picasso all through the night while he happily creates and destroys an unlimited number of masterpieces. The energy is there if we give ourselves permission to tap into it.



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On the subject of joy. Everybody wants a bit of this stuff, but people on the whole don't seem to be getting much of it. Maybe the widespread discontent that exists is partly due to our consumer society. So our lives are no good as they are, and they never will be, because there are just too many things that you need to buy in order to make your life work properly again.

The other thing is that we feel somehow cut off from any source of power or benevolence. We are floating around on a raft somewhere in the middle of a dark sea, and to make matters worse we seem to have mislaid our mobile phone. Things are bleak. We don't know where we are, and nobody out there gives a damn. That seems to be the situation. As for joy, who really believes in such Pollyanna nonsense anymore? And yet, deep down, people know that joy is a possibility; here and there they retain a dim memory of having experienced such a state of consciousness – but unfortunately, lately, quite frankly, I've just been too busy.

At one stage I was touring a workshop called Art and Magic. As a preparatory exercise in the workshop I would get people to complete the sentence: "Magic is..." After giving a couple of examples such as: "Magic is lying naked on the rocks listening to the sound of a waterfall" or "Magic is gazing at the river in Delft where Vermeer painted his famous townscape" people would get started on the exercise and not want to stop. Sentence after sentence would come up full of magical incidents. The thing that I have noticed about these "magical" experiences is that they are almost all sensory based: the smell of a crusty loaf of bread; sipping a glass of wine and listening to Mozart; gazing into my newborn daughter's

Annie Sprinkle Defeats Falstaff, acrylic, 67 x 48 cm
(The Pirate Papers)

I think our old friend Falstaff is in love, totally in love with Annie Sprinkle, the lady who beat him in the arm-wrestling competition. I'm not sure, but I think he may have been foxing in that competition - it seems absurd that a woman only a third of his weight could beat him so easily. However he told me that when she looked him directly in the eyes that he simply went weak all over and forgot what he was doing.

*Anyway, I found him in the ship's library reading Ovid's *The Art of Love*. He was concerned that Ovid strongly advised against giving presents to women, saying that they only wanted a bigger present next time. Katherine Millet advised him to forget about presents and that the most infallible seduction technique is a simple bunch of flowers. In the whole history of human relationships, she said, no woman, no matter how hard-bitten or cynical, has ever been able to resist a bunch of flowers - it was more or less a law of nature. This sounded like total horseshit to me, but Falstaff immediately scooped up the vase of flowers that had been standing on the library table, and went off whistling for the first date he has had in four hundred years.*

face for the first time; stroking the hot flanks of a pony and feeling him shudder; and so on.

Joy seems to be a natural thing for human beings; but we learn quickly that it is a fairly inappropriate emotion to be experiencing a lot of the time. All right for children of course, but they will learn in due course that life is actually a tragedy, and that the best you can hope for is a modicum of happiness here and there.

The Pirate Papers

John Ellison's recent exhibition at Nolan on Lovel Gallery

I felt like an adventure. In the spirit of Yeats' poem *Why should not old men be mad*, I gathered together a pirate crew, made up of heroes of my imagination – some real like Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, and some fictional, such as Sir John Falstaff, and under my captain-ship we sailed the seven seas.

To everybody's surprise and most of all mine, we ended up on Crete and then we came all the way back again for this exhibition. In my imagination I kept my eye on the crew – six women and a dozen men – and wrote up some of their adventures. Sometimes the paintings and drawings inspired the writings and sometimes the writings inspired the illustrations. I had never been on Facebook before and somebody advised me that all people want to see are photos of cats – but I decided to regale my new found Facebook friends with the adventures of Captain Jack and his crew. Most people I imagine were totally bewildered by these antics and simply assumed that I had lost my marbles. But, you know, who cares? And due to the experiment I discovered that I am a bloody good sailor of my imaginary ship and that there is every good reason why all men should be mad.

Watching Rembrandt Paint, acrylic, 67 x 48 cm
(The Pirate Papers)

I asked Rembrandt if I could watch him paint. Just like that. I surprised myself. He looked at me for a moment and said: You can watch me if you sit in the corner of the studio where I can't see you and you are as silent as a block of cheese. Fine. And so when the Master next took up his brushes and posed his assistant against the light, I was seated behind him, hardly breathing, imitating a block of gouda cheese.

For a while he did nothing; he just stared. Then with a vehement movement he brushed blue over the top part of the canvas. Having done that he sat down in his cane chair and began to sob. My God, this was weird: the great Rembrandt, head in hands, crying like a baby. My impulse was to go and comfort him: Pull yourself together man - remember who you are - but he had asked me to be a block of cheese. His assistant continued to pose as though this was a normal part of the procedure.

Eventually he stood up, poured himself a large glass of gin, and began to paint again. I couldn't really see what he was doing, his broad back was in the way. After about twenty minutes he put down his palette, signaled to his assistant and they both left the studio. No longer required to be a block of cheese, I approached the canvas to see what he had done. He had painted in the blue of the sea, the boat, railing and the French windows, but he had left a white blank where the woman was supposed to be. Not what I had quite expected. I left the studio thinking: Things are not always as they seem.

I say that if we can re-establish our connection with the central powerhouse – the universe itself – and if we learn to use our senses to be in contact with our natural surroundings then joy will come back into our lives naturally because basically our brains are pre-wired for ecstasy. We have all we need to be joyful. We don't have to run after it; it is freely available to us as a part of being a human being. We need to turn on the rapture circuits.

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