

## In conversation with Gavin Renshaw

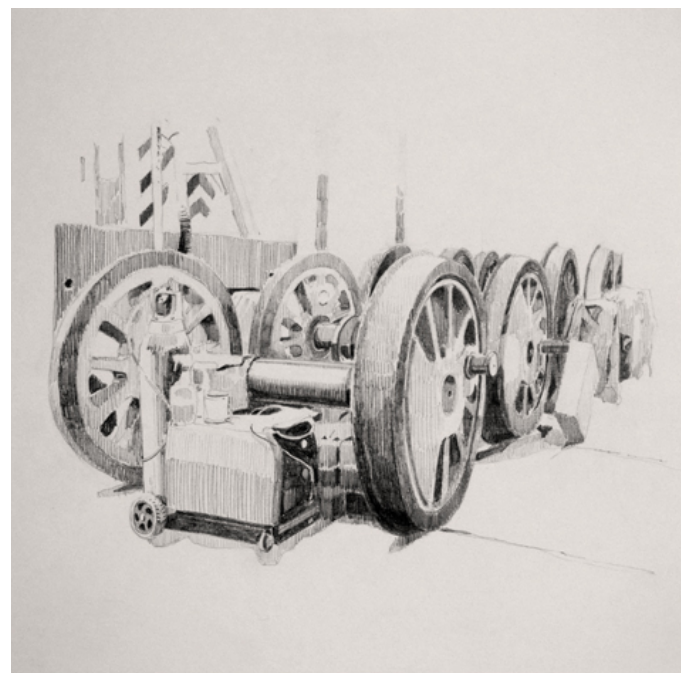
In 2020 The Harris Museum, Art Gallery and Library commissioned three artists, Kathryn Poole, Anita George and Gavin Renshaw, to each create a work in response to aspects of Courtaulds Ltd heritage in Preston, as part of the Courtauld National Partners Programme.

In this interview, artist and illustrator Gavin Renshaw talks about his discovery of Caliban, a steam engine commissioned by Courtaulds Ltd in 1937 to shunt raw materials around the Red Scar Mill in Preston. Gavin discusses how he approached capturing aspects of the fascinating story of Caliban in his drawings. He explains the significance of drawing to his process, from uncovering and depicting key aspects of the narrative to helping to answer important questions of composition.

Your brief for this commission was to create a work that responds to aspects of the Courtaulds Ltd heritage in Preston. How did you begin researching your starting point for the work?

I knew very little about the history of the Courtaulds Ltd factory in Preston, so it was compelling to find out about what the factory produced, its long history and its legacy in the city. The built landscape (both urban and industrial) have been ongoing themes within my work so I began by looking at the architectural heritage. The Red Scar site is now occupied by an industrial estate which borders a nature reserve, so any remnants of the grandeur and scale of the original factory have been erased. The rail lines and sidings which served the factory are still visible in places so that prompted me to look into the rail connection and the part it played in the site's history. By chance I was chatting with a friend about what purpose the rail connection served, and it was then I was told of an engine called Caliban.

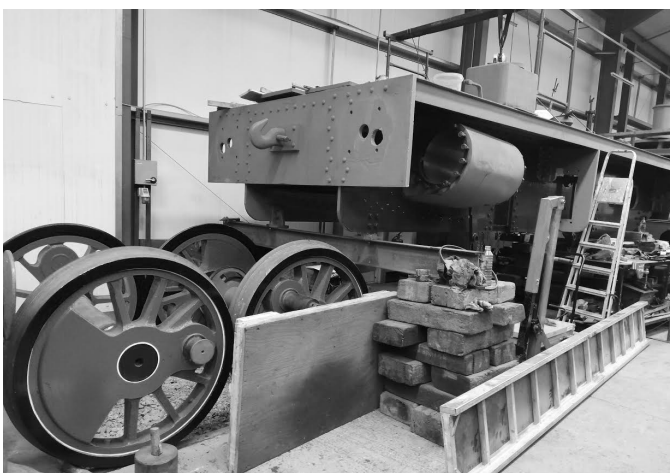
“ One of the people who bought Caliban from Courtaulds Ltd in the 1970s, Alan Middleton, had also been an engineer at the company's Red Scar factory. ”



Gavin Renshaw, *Caliban* (2020)

What did you discover about Caliban, the Courtaulds Ltd steam engine? Why were you interested in following the trail?

Caliban was brought into commission in 1937 and used at Red Scar to shunt raw materials around the vast site. It was sold by Courtaulds Ltd in the early 1970s, redundant because of technological development, before the Red Scar factory closed in 1980. The engine was bought by Lancashire Railway Circle and taken to the Lake District, where it spent 30 years. Eventually it was brought back to Preston for refurbishment and it is now being painstakingly restored, a long-term project that will take many years. When I initially saw the archive videos it seemed to me that of all the machinery within the factory site, this was an iconic trace of something important – its story, its neglect over the years, its 30 years up in the lakes before finally being brought back to Preston. I felt an impulse to see it. I just knew that this was one of the only surviving artifacts



from the site and a lasting legacy of what once was, and I think this chimed with what I had hoped I would discover. It was a relic almost lost and then saved, and a real piece of heritage which until then I felt I couldn't really locate. I think I arranged to see it a few days later, and discovered it was being refurbished by the Furness Railway Trust on Preston docks.

### Did the story resonate with you in other ways?

I also understood that the character of Caliban in the *Tempest*, first thought of as a subsidiary character, has, during the second half of the 20th century, become a contentious figure in the play. Some critics believe that he was actually one of the key figures, or at least was subject of duplicitous reading not to be taken at face value. There were aspects of the story which seemed to echo elements of the nature of the Courtaulds Ltd factory site. Its initial prosperity and how it became a saviour of the town, being Preston's second largest employer, to its inevitable downfall and demise with all the criticism which followed the collapse of such a huge local employer. Who would have foreseen that the humble engine Caliban would outlive all that was once there and end up being the one piece of heritage to be restored and loved and appreciated?

### The people working on the engines at Ribble Steam Railway and Museum feature prominently in your drawings, and you capture their attention to the task and the relationships at play in fluid detail. What is their significance to you, in the story of Caliban?

I initially thought I would only feature the various stages of restoration of the constituent parts of Caliban, but the more I started to sketch the more I thought the volunteers at the workshop were a key part of the story. One of the people who had bought Caliban from Courtaulds Ltd in the 1970s, Alan Middleton, had also been an engineer at the company's Red Scar factory, and he features in my drawings as one of the people working on the restoration. On a more compositional note, without the figures in the main image it was difficult to realise the scale of the structures. They brought the human element, the labourers.

The components scattered around the workshop are such massive hulks, and viewing them in this setting is very abstract. Everything in the workshop is measured in imperial, with even the smallest components weighing something similar to a small car. It is all moved around using reasonably humble methods by a couple of guys at a time, it's incredible really. Their knowledge of these machines is something rare nowadays. The gradual reduction in grimy, labour intensive work prompts



Gavin Renshaw, *Caliban* (2020)

that nostalgic affection for such activities, in a classical sense. Steam engines also apparently have a character of their own, with quirks and foibles that need to be learned by their custodians. So, the men needed to be in the drawings, amongst the mayhem of components and tools and ordered chaos. It is very difficult to get them to talk about their relationship with these machines that they spend so much of their time on. There is a real love there, but it is well hidden behind routine and procedure.

### Your approach addresses capturing a relationship with the built environment and its heritage, creating and communicating an unspoken dialogue with a sense of place. Can you sum up how your drawings speak of your own relationship with the workshop at Ribble Steam Railway and Museum and the engines there?

These kinds of places, the engine yard and factories, allow us to tell stories through the lifespan of particular objects, or through customs and processes or perhaps specific landscapes, rather than the human view being the central focus. I think this work represents a balance between both people and site and object, but it is an individual's perspective on a human landscape. Museums have always worked this way, communicating stories through objects – perhaps art can at times be the interface between the two. The objects in the restoration workshop are in a state of suspension,

outside of their designed purpose. Because of this it is easy to apply context which sits beyond what would be there if the engine was fully assembled. Objects become very interesting when taken out of the usual operating parameters.

Can you explain in a bit more detail how you have approached illustrating some of the narrative of this fascinating story in your drawings? How did you approach planning the composition of your drawings?

I imagined I would have drawings of grand pieces of machinery, and grand things happening. But in the workshop everything happens in tiny steps, very slowly. There is a lot of discussion and many incremental procedures. There is only a handful of people working on Caliban – the very large undertaken by very few. The time frames are huge, more than five years to fully restore an engine, and nothing is rushed.

I knew I was only going to be able to illustrate a short window in the current life of Caliban, so it felt a little like diary entries of my learning and knowledge there. After a lot of study drawings I set to work on the larger piece – I wanted this to

roam across the paper rather than be defined, stretching out not sure of an end. It also needed to be broken, disjointed, fractured, collaged and a touch abstract. I wanted the work to ask some questions of the viewer: What am I looking at? Are these raw materials? Is this a train or a work station? I took my study sketches and a handful of reference photos and started piecing together what I had seen there. I felt that the whole scene needed to have an element of disorientation, and that scale between frames should be arbitrary. Some of the study drawings capture a lot of the current story of Caliban, the restoration of individual components, the discussion. And then there are other parts which sit idle for months at a time untouched. I feel I've only just scratched the surface.

How does drawing feature in your main practise? Can you explain the advantage to your work of drawing in situ, as opposed to drawing from a photograph?

Drawing is the fastest way to capture something outside of a photograph. In a photograph you capture the scene perfectly, in a drawing you try to capture how you have engaged with the scene. It



Vincent Van Gogh, *A Tile Factory* (1888), The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust) © The Courtauld

allows you to edit on site, to add and take away at will, but also to represent it in your own way. If you draw something, you have spent a good portion of time looking at its shape, colour, proportion, how light lands on its surface, texture, and so on. You have a better understanding of it when you come to recall it. I also enjoy sketching with a large width, blunt pencil. It eliminates the temptation to render detail and allows me to just concentrate on light/shadow and proportion. Buildings and machinery can take on human qualities. They have many stories – some are grand and others are tragic. If you want realism, take a photo – a drawing does not have to be this. The work may need to convey something and that can be very subtle.

Are there particular artists whose work you draw on to inform your approaches? Who has had the most impact?

I love the work of Harold Gilman, and those humble working class interiors. And illustrators like Tony Weare, who had to say a lot with very little. I like to pull influences from fashion and graphic design, film and typography. It can literally come from anywhere. The Courtauld Institute has a drawing by Van Gogh which I just love called *A Tile Factory* (1888). There is also an Auerbach drawing in this exhibition (*Study for Oxford Street Building Site*, c.1957-59).

It seems that for Auerbach, the painting develops from the drawing – the painting takes on those characteristics felt whilst making the drawing, re-sculpting rather than following the more literal reference. He talks about structure and forces relating to the edge, and this is so true! To recreate those elements that work in the drawing, the use of a grid is imperative to ensure nothing is lost in translation. I use a grid not only to scale drawings



Frank Auerbach, *Study for Oxford Street Building Site* (c.1957-59), The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)  
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up to huge proportions, but also to ensure that the composition cannot be skewed beyond what the drawing captures.

[Download the Drawing Narrative learning resource by Gavin Renshaw](#)