

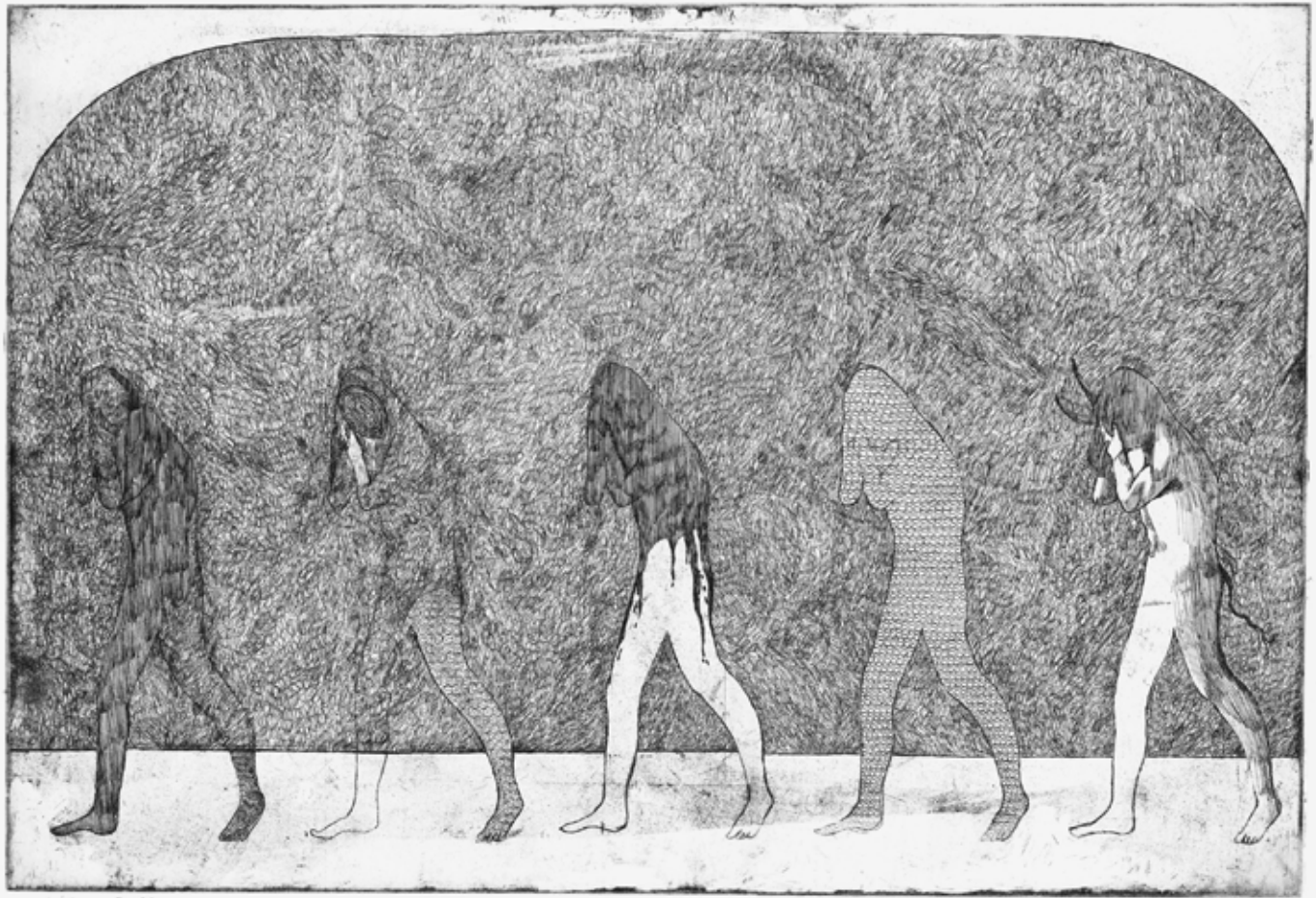
*A Beautiful  
Mind*

Alone with his thoughts, artist Robert Fry creates masterpieces that have caught the world's attention – and in particular Charles Saatchi's. He leaves his inspired isolation to speak to *HANNAH LEMON* about his haunting creations

With a psychiatrist father and psychotherapist mother, studying Robert Fry would be a Freudian dream for many. But looking at Robert, you wouldn't be able to identify an intense, introspective artist. Tall and tanned with a handsome mop of dark curly hair, he looks like many other 30-something Notting Hill singletons might. Dressed in a casual black suit and white shirt, he might not even pass as a painter, although, looking closely, the small white flecks of paint adamantly clinging to his hands are a small giveaway. However, it is not until we start discussing his life and work that his reflective, psychological nature becomes apparent. The artist admits that his paintings and etchings of the human figure are formed from an interesting subconscious terrain. "There is quite a big psychological theme that is consistent in the paintings I have produced," he says. "Whether I have inherited that from my parents, I don't know."

Although both parents' careers were in psychoanalysis, they passed down some of their creative genes too. Robert's mother is trained as an architect and both parents are good at drawing. This creative flair is inherent in all three of their children; Robert's older brothers Nick and Alex work in employment law and television respectively but were talented artists in their youth. They were raised in a house in Islington, where his parents still live, but it was only Robert who chased the artistic life and attended the Fine Arts College in Hampstead where he was given the opportunity to hone his skills. "We used to do life drawing twice a week and we did printmaking there," he says. "It was a great privilege to do that when I was 16." From here, he went on to study fine art as an undergraduate at Oxford Brookes University. "At the time painting was incredibly unfashionable," continues Robert. "I think there were two painters in the entire department. The tutors were fantastic and it was a brilliant education but they were much more interested in people working in time-based media and conceptual installations." ►

All photography: Alex Bramall; Instagram: @abrampics



Study for Red Series, 2013, etching on zinc plate, 30.7 x 44.3 cm

► Interest in painting in the art world has since increased steadily over the years; no doubt helped by the art collectors at the top. After Charles Saatchi bought three paintings from his first show at the Alexia Goethe Gallery, Robert was selected to be part of the Saatchi Gallery's *Newspeak: British Art Now* exhibition in 2009, which showcased a new generation of young artists. "It was a real highlight in my career," says Robert. He was

## “Saatchi has bought a lot of my work but I’ve never managed to meet him”

included with more than 60 artists, many of whom used painting as their preferred medium. "I think it must have been 50 per cent paintings maybe," says Robert. "Extraordinary. Compared to the show [Saatchi] did 12 years previous to that – the *Sensation* exhibition – which launched all those Young British Artists like Tracey Emin." This helped establish Robert's career and he has since had exhibitions and been part of private collections throughout Europe, South Korea and the US, with Mario Testino and Saatchi among his fan base. I ask him what it was like to meet the latter but Robert replies: "No one meets him. He has bought a lot of my work and I've always tried to meet him but I've never managed to!"

He pensively moves onto the topic of his work, and I readjust myself on one of the fold-away chairs we are sitting on to take in the three dark canvases that stand starkly against the white boarded walls of the room. The paintings are impressively large, containing life-size figures; although, the ones I face aren't nearly as big as the paintings in the *Red Series*, which were nearly two by three metres. But the thing that captures my interest the most is the deep purple palette – an unusual colour choice. "I think it is incredibly difficult to work with," says Robert. "And I quite like that. I find it challenging." He tells me that although the purple may look like one coat of paint it is actually layer upon layer of different mediums. "The paintings I work on are very mixed media," he explains. "They are constructed with five or six types of paint. Although the paintings appear to be monochrome, they are actually constructed with lots of different materials that have lots of different appearances." The process involves using enamel, household gloss, oil paint, acrylic – a sort of psychological jigsaw he is piecing together.

Robert also etches, which, he explains, is a very different process. "You are scratching into a plate and you can't really see what you're doing," he says. "The plate is quite dark and you are using a fine instrument. When you print, it comes out in a way you would never have anticipated because the whole thing is reversed." He produces one etching from a pile of his work and I am stunned to silence. The word "DAYS" is neatly and



*Red 6*, 2010, acrylic and oil on canvas, 285 x 198 cm



minutely etched into the plate over and over and over again. The process must have been painstakingly tiring – it almost looks like the scrawl of a madman. The etchings came from a dark place he tells me, when he had just broken up with a girlfriend and moved back to his parents house at the age of 25. “I locked myself in my old room and spent three months producing these etchings,” he says. “My life was not in a great place, but that work I made was probably the best work I have ever produced. All that negativity had an extremely positive effect on the outcome of my work.”

His uncomfortable collections of work are more than just about Robert though; it is a reflection of humans as a whole. He once said that his paintings were a “brutal picture of the human condition” and I can see now what he means – they act as an honest depiction of the deficits and neuroses of the human character, which most people would prefer to shy away from. “What I’m trying to bring to the surface, perhaps, is not necessarily what someone wants to be faced with,” he says. “A landscape or a sunset is very nice to look at but I am going into something that is a part of ourselves, which is not necessarily something we want to look at every day on a wall.” This confrontation with the self is difficult to escape when the size of his paintings are so extreme and it must be challenging to be stuck alone in a room with only thoughts and a paintbrush to produce them.

It all seems quite intense but this works well for him and the small space provides the seclusion that he needs. “Somehow you just want to be isolated,” he says. “I think that tradition works. Isolation produces results.” But he isn’t always cooped up in the studio; he has owned a flat off Holland Road for the last seven years. Robert admits that the area is not the creative place it used to be, but doesn’t necessarily count that as a bad thing. In fact, it’s quite useful because a lot of his business investors live in the area. “I like Holland Park itself and some of the local pubs, and a lot of my collectors live round there.”

As the interview comes to an end, Robert locks up the studio and we walk out the door. I feel a bit sad to be leaving. Time seems to have stood still outside and the safe studio space, where thoughts are unbound and free to roam around, has been quite cleansing. I admire Robert’s bravery in tackling difficult subjects that we are more than willing to push to the back of our minds and I can understand why he craves this little piece of quiet space in London. If only we could all have one. ■

[robertfrystudio.com](http://robertfrystudio.com)

*The hardback edition of 100 Painters of Tomorrow, which features Robert Fry, is published by Thames & Hudson on 22 September; [thamesandhudson.com](http://thamesandhudson.com)*