Spiritual Ecology

The organic work of laconic British painter "S" speaks for itself. But what is saying?

November 1, 1997 By Stephen Greco

The British artist "S" is a man of few words. Not surprisingly, a conversation with him about his work yields few details about either the meaning of the large abstract paintings he makes or the technique by which he makes them. Nor is the fact that he's still healthy after many years of HIV the first thing he cares to speak of.

"I'm glad we didn't talk about that," he says of his health toward the end of a 20-minute trans-Atlantic phone call that is composed of as much staticky silence as speech. "I want people to see the work for itself."

At first glance, these pictures look like portraits of the famous micro-organisms we have become so familiar with—viruses, bacteria, blood cells. Or they could seem to document the effects these microscopic celebrities can have on human tissue—desiccation, ulceration, coagulation, necrotization.

But such medical associations are tossed around by reviewers and collectors, not by "S" himself. He doesn't even title his pictures.

"I forgot to give them titles," he says, admitting almost apologetically that he is not accustomed to being interviewed. If "S" has remained unpracticed in art-speak and media glibness, he has also stayed clear of the standard international art-world rut in which dealers, curators and critics sometimes inadvertently hijack our experience of seeing work freely. "S" purposefully avoided the English art-school track ("It didn't seem the right place to go to be an artist"). Now, living in an elaborately decorated four-story Victorian house in Brixton with painter Peter Armstrong, his companion of 17 years, he sells work not through a dealer but through a network of friends and admirers.

A British colleague describes the figure "S" cuts on London's art scene as "truly original." Not a club kid, drag queen or fashion victim, he has a look that's definitely unique, arms intricately inked with vines by tattoo/ performance artist Alex Binnie. The initial "S" used as sole moniker stands for Steven and was "thrust upon" him years ago by friends. He's decided not to use his family name. It was his stepfather's, he says, without elaborating.

To stimulate conversation, I tell "S" some of the things I see in his pictures, such as the four

cardinal humors that were once said to govern health and temperament—blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile) and melancholy (black bile). I also perceive an arid, or perhaps abandoned, landscape, as seen in an aerial photograph or even on an interplanetary fly-by, as over Mars. Other things: Sperm cells, mummified flesh, optimism.

Are these assumptions fair, I ask.

“No. Not really,” “S” says quietly. After a moment of reflection, he continues. “The paintings are sort of about ecology. It’s all a system—people, the planet, HIV. It’s kinetic.”

I was thinking through the implications of this view when “S” called back, a few days later. This time, he was less laconic. “I was thinking about whether AIDS has anything to do with…not so much the paintings, but the way I live my life and the way I choose not to push myself. When you’ve got HIV, you’re told you’re going to die in five years, in ten years. It sort of fucks up your time scale a bit. So I haven’t launched myself. I’ve just been doing the work.” And the work speaks for itself.

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