BLENHEIM PALACE

ART FOUNDATION

Michael Frahm in conversation with Cecily Brown

MF: Cecily, I think it's a good idea to start at the beginning, so my first question is: when was your first encounter with art and art-making?

CB: I've loved drawing since I was a small child. I used to draw all the time and apparently from the age of three I would say that I wanted to be an artist. I won a little competition when I was five, second prize at a local flower show. I think I knew this was all I ever wanted to do.

I didn't have a very arty childhood – or at least it was middlebrow English arty. We went to Florence when I was about eight and I did a drawing in my little book for school of Caravaggio's Medusa from the Uffizi. That's the first painting I remember seeing, around 1976.

MF: From drawing, how did you come to painting? Did you ever consider any other medium?

CB: Painting was probably what I was most exposed to when I was young, so it was what I was most attracted to. I did go through a couple of years at art school when I played with photography, film and video because as a painter I felt like a pariah. I often realise when I talk about this – about how painting was so unpopular – that I forget to say that I too had a lot of problems with painting. I was really questioning how it could still be relevant, how there could be anything left to say in such an old medium. I talked myself out of painting for a couple of years, convincing myself it was all over, that painting was intrinsically retro and one couldn't possibly add anything. But luckily, I came back to it because however much I try, I've never been able to think in any other medium.

MF: You are hailed as one of the central figures in the so-called 'resurgence' of painting. Do you believe painting was every truly 'dead'?

CB: Painting has been declared dead many times, but, you know, painters are gonna paint! Things go out of fashion, whether it's because the museums don't want to show them or collectors don't want to buy them. And it's hard for painting to be avant-garde. In a way, we are post-avant-garde now, which is why painting has been allowed back into the conversation. There are always cynics who say it's purely market-driven, but I have always argued that painting is the most democratic and accessible of the arts. And this brings me to Blenheim because one of the things that excited me about this opportunity was the idea of painting with an audience in mind, making specific work that would resonate with a specific place, democratically.

MF: Yes, the audience at Blenheim is very different to the audience you would get in a gallery or museum. Here, most visitors might not be familiar with the language of contemporary art and might not expect to encounter it in the Palace.

CB: So I wanted to infiltrate the Palace quite subtly, by quietly replacing existing paintings and weaving my works into the collection. I've chosen traditional subjects like the hunt, the kind of genre painting associated with old country houses, because I want visitors to do a double-take, to think for a second that my work belongs there, but then to see that it's a slightly distorted vision of the world depicted around them.

MF: I think this interrogation of tradition really comes through. The works you have painted for Blenheim seem both to embrace a romanticised, historic Britishness while also offering a slightly sceptical critique of it. Can you tell me a bit more about this tension?

CB: The idea of tension runs very deep in my work – I often use the words 'fragmented' or 'broken' in reference to it. And as you know, I agreed to do this project partly because I could immediately imagine paintings on this subject. I have been deliberately trying to understand what England means to me. I've used gardens and landscapes a lot in my work, and over the last few years I've realised they come from memories of my childhood, perhaps a longing for the green and pleasant land I've long been away from. I grew up near Box Hill in Surrey, where they film a lot of costume dramas – it is picturesque, idyllic English countryside. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, so I also started thinking of all that garish patterned wallpaper and was prompted to look up imagery from Yellow Submarine and Monty Python – things that resonated with memories of my British childhood.

Right now we are living through a huge and traumatic moment in Britain's history and its relationship to the rest of the world, and the strangeness of watching that from a distance, from the United States, has made me think again about my relationship to England. I've been joking that for the first time ever my work is topical, as it has always had an apocalyptical bent. I've been obsessed with heaven and hell and the idea that they are in fact the same place.
And right now, it seems like that's here.

MF: The title of one of your new works is Battles were meant to be painted. Could you talk a little about the way that painting seems to address some of that unease, the irony of the glorified image that doesn't quite match the darker reality?

CB: The title comes from The Tin Drum by Günter Grass. Although Grass revealed himself to be something of a problematic figure, The Tin Drum has been one of my favourite novels for a long time. There is a passage in which the narrator is in and out of consciousness during an extraordinary speech about colours. It's high-spirited, galloping prose, and one of the lines is 'battles were meant to be painted'. When I came to Blenheim, one of the first things I noticed were the toy soldiers everywhere as well as re-enactments of battles, and it reminded me of my own childhood and learning about the First and Second World Wars from a completely British perspective. It's interesting, as an adult, to realise that we were taught a very selective history of England that is all glory. So I wanted to make my own battle paintings.

MF: Your exhibition is rooted in Blenheim's history and British history as well as England right now. Another work I'm intrigued by is There'll always be an England.

CB: It will hang opposite Battles were meant to be painted. These were the first two paintings I started working on when I got back from my first visit to Blenheim. I knew I wanted the colours and the flag in there, so there is an English flag in the middle. The title There'll always be an England comes from a patriotic song written in 1939 and sung by Vera Lynn. I was listening to her when I was making these paintings – all those amazing wartime songs. Most of my titles should be taken with a pinch of salt – they're almost always found titles and not usually descriptive.

Here, the title is meant somewhat ironically, as it will soon to be all that's left… England made a nationalistic choice to leave the European Union, and it seems so ironic when I grew up hearing 'never again' in reference to the Second World War. Maybe I was just innocent, but it always felt as if the world was getting better, that we had reached the depths humans could go to and had learnt from them and moved on. But right now it feels as if it could almost happen again and I find it terrifying.

MF: Do you feel political in your work?

CB: I've never set out to be political and usually I try to avoid anything topical. But when I started making my shipwreck drawings, copying from Delacroix and Gericault, I kept hearing horrific stories in the news and seeing photographs of migrants arriving on boats. It was tragic how closely they resembled the Delacroix shipwreck – human bodies caught up in a nightmare. I tried to work from the news photographs but it was just too close and sad. I definitely think I use art – and often art of the past – as a bridge to talk about difficult things in the present. I never wanted to place my work in a moment, partly because time goes so quickly and I want it to have a timeless quality, which I think painting often possesses more than other mediums.

MF: Let's talk more about painting as a medium. You are the first painter in our programme, which has featured many conceptual artists, and your process of conceiving and making work is an integral part of the exhibition. In the Great Hall we are showing a vitrine of your source material and reference imagery, and in the China Ante Room we are displaying your drawings. Can you tell me more about your creative process?

CB: I always work with a lot of images around me, within my peripheral vision. I'm always playing with print-outs on the floor of my studio and looking at them in different ways – which then feeds back into the work and creates relationships between Richard Dadd, the Beatles and illustrations to books from my childhood like Marilyn Nickson's Timothy and the Forest Folk, for instance. It's wonderful just to play with all this imagery. If you study the vitrine carefully, you'll see elements from it popping up throughout the show. I'm curious about what the public might think about the fact that nearly everything comes from something else. Is that an issue, I wonder?

MF: Not at all. I've been to many artists' studios over the years but I particularly love yours because it's a painter's studio where you really feel your energy, the emotions, the research, the depth with which you go into your subjects. I spend so much time looking at the studio floor where you lay out your source material and I think the vitrine gives visitors to the exhibition a similar insight into your process and practice.

CB: Yes, absolutely. I think my drawings do the same thing. I did a show at the Drawing Center in New York in 2016 and so many people said to me, 'oh, I finally see how to read your paintings'. I think that background does enrich the experience. But people also often think the drawings are studies for the large paintings, which they are not – I see them all as part of the same practice. The drawings are gathering information from a source, such as the imagery in the vitrine. To draw the Blenheim Spaniels many times is like internalising the image into my muscle memory so that when I go to paint it I don't have to refer to anything. I've always done that – drawn from something else. For instance, I used to draw from pornography a lot when I was making sexual paintings because I would rather draw from a photograph than from real people.

For Blenheim, I did a lot of hunt drawings and I printed out lots of images from the battle scenes in Stanley Kubrick's 1975 film Barry Lyndon, which I've always been obsessed with. In the case of my battle paintings I didn't start with a final image in my mind, just with a loose idea of a battle, not drawing anything out at first but just going in with colour. I knew I'd be using greens and khakis, as well as red for blood, poppies, soldiers' coats and the flag, but then the soldiers gradually became hunters and now they are interchangeable. So a lot of it was driven by colour.

MF: So to what degree did chance play a part in how the battle paintings turned out?

CB: It played a big part. I started by laying down colour, moving the paint around and seeing what emerged, trying to keep it very loose and not pin down any imagery too early on. A lot of people think I start with a figurative painting and then paint over it in an abstract way, but more often I'm trying to hold on to a subject that disappears on me as I paint. The works are teeming with imagery – if you give them time, you see lots of little heads and horses and bits of animals, even if at first glance they seem quite abstract.

The criss-crossing weapons made me think of the criss-crossing grass you get in fairyland. I've looked at a lot of Victorian fairy paintings, so I went back to those and started working very directly from Richard Dadd, the great fairy painter. So basically all the paintings – and particularly Cornets and Coronets and The Forest Festival – started to become my version of his masterpiece, The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke. I like that dichotomy between the battle and the utopian fairyland, the long-lost Elysian Fields where fairies co-exist happily with animals. There is definitely a wistfulness and melancholy to it.

MF: One of the things I love about your paintings is the way they go from figuration to abstraction and back again. You can make out elements within them that then disappear, like visions. Some of them are quite psychedelic in that way, certainly if we consider that you took inspiration from the 1960s and 1970s and from fairy imagery. How do you feel about the word 'psychedelic' being attached to your work?

CB: I'm happy with that. It's an extraordinary thing when you paint – you are very free in your mind, very stream of consciousness. I've always been interested in visionary art, in people like William Blake, Gustave Moreau or James Ensor, who cross over with psychedelia in different ways. Fairyland looked to me like a continuation of the 1960s images I'd printed out – certainly the Richard Dadd painting is extraordinarily psychedelic. Of course, a lot of fairy painters would have been taking opium...

MF: As you mentioned earlier, hunting scenes are also a major subject of your new body of work. Tell me a bit more about these.

CB: To begin with, I just wanted images of hunts. I had a book of photographs from 1960s England that included a picture of a fox hunt. It made me think about hunting and its relationship to the English countryside and to the aristocracy and ideas of class – as well as notions of rupture and violence and turmoil. The minute I started to draw the dogs and the hunts, I thought, 'this subject is so amazing, how have I never painted it before?' My idea was that the hunt paintings would be like seeing some kind of abomination at high speed – as if you're watching something from the window of a train, say. It's a beautiful day, a bucolic landscape, then suddenly you glimpse something horrific out of the corner of your eye, though too fleetingly to see properly. The idea fits in well with other things I've done – for instance, my first paintings were bunny gang rapes, turbulent scenes full of animals. The hunt paintings for Blenheim have ended up being very close in spirit to those early works.

MF: The work of baroque Flemish painter Frans Snyders was an important source of inspiration. What specifically drew you to him?

CB: Snyders was a master of the hunt painting. I printed out loads of his images and started to work from them. At the time, I had the idea of looking at art that used to be in the Blenheim collection so I could make work that relates to pieces that were once in these rooms but are no longer there. I got hold of the Christie's catalogue of a big sale of 1886 by the 8th Duke of Marlborough, which included works by Rubens and Titian. In it I also found Snyders' Boar Hunt, which was very like the painting I was working from. I loved the twist that I'd been working on these paintings for a month before I realised they had once been part of Blenheim.

Hunt After Frans Snyders is much more figurative than my other paintings. I wanted the subject to be clear, not to get too abstract, so I thought of drawing it in charcoal first. I often draw in charcoal on paper but not usually directly on the canvas – mostly my paintings are much less planned so I avoid starting with a drawing on the surface. But this was very helpful and it felt so different to my usual way of working that I did it again for The Triumph of Death.

MF: Another figurative work is The Children of the Fourth Duke, which is your 'copy' of Sir Joshua Reynolds' The 4th Duke of Marlborough and his Family (1777–78) in the Red Drawing Room. What was the impetus for this work?

CB: That was a playful moment. On my first visit to Blenheim, a copy of the Reynolds painting by Lady Caroline, one of the 4th Duke's daughters, was displayed on an easel. I thought, 'I want to do that', to put myself in Lady Caroline's shoes and replace her copy with mine as a way of infiltrating the space. I worked in catering for a long time when I was a young artist, often in places very similar to Blenheim where there was this upstairs-downstairs thing, so I find it hilarious that my work now gets to be shown in this very grand palace. Rather than making a freehand copy, I employed a printing technique that's new to my practice, where I print an image on to the canvas before I start painting. I'm never going to be able to paint like Reynolds, so I'm just going to cheat! All art is cheating.

MF: Speaking of new techniques, you've also stepped out of painting by turning one of your works into a rug for the Third State Room. You don't use assistants, you paint all your own works, so I suppose having an external fabricator must be something new? Can you say more about the experience of making that work?

CB: We talked about several different possibilities for that room. It has spectacular tapestries lining the walls and before I visited I thought I might take some down and put work there instead. But as soon as I saw them, I thought, 'I don't want to take these down, they're great'. This became my approach across the whole exhibition: I wanted my work to co-exist with the Palace.

MF: You wanted to find the balance?

CB: Yes. I think it was your idea to do a rug, wasn't it? Walking around the Palace, we came up with so many ideas – remember I actually would have loved to do some topiary? Anyway, I loved the idea of a rug and immediately thought that the painting for it should play on heraldry and armorial flags, very flat imagery. Making the Armorial paintings was one of the biggest departures for me: they play on the flat imagery of a banner or flag but are animated – again, a bit psychedelic. Someone once described my work as looking like someone had thrown a hand grenade into a Versace store. They meant it as an insult, but I thought, 'I love that!' So with the heraldry I wanted to give the fragmented effect of an explosion. Those paintings are very dynamic and dramatic, almost cartoonish, especially with their bright colours. The one we chose for the carpet is really bold.

MF: I think it forms a beautiful ending, walking through the state rooms and then out into the Long Library where we are showing the final painting in the exhibition, The Triumph of Death. It's your largest work to date, drawing together many references and elements from the show into one final work. Could you talk about that specific painting in more detail?

CB: The Triumph of Death is weirdly the only thing that's random in the exhibition in that it was inspired by a 15th-century wall painting in Palermo that has absolutely zero to do with Blenheim. Last March, when I was in Sicily, I saw this fresco and loved it. It has an incredibly skeletal horse – a triumphant figure of death – charging into town, while on the right you have the idle rich making hay while the sun shines, sipping champagne (at least in my version). Above them, I painted more gentlefolk, some caressing lapdogs while wrapped in the furs of dead foxes. A soldier in a red coat lurks to the right, recalling the soldier with the red beard in the fairytale of The Red Shoes, a sort of devillish figure. I included a cameo of a windswept, damaged Blenheim Palace and my secret comic relief moment is invisible to viewers but I like knowing it's there: some tiny figures escaping from the Palace carrying a golden loo. The whole idea is the folly of humankind, standing by while disaster strikes, still partying even though devastation is coming to town.

MF: It's very macabre...

CB: Very. I felt it was very fitting for the Palace – it's got a battle, it's got everything. Because I'd been doing the hunting paintings, I made some of the figures something between soldiers and hunters. At one point I was thinking it was a revenge of the animals, where hunters are being trampled by deer and boar. You can see the dead and wounded on the bottom left, abandoned in the wake of Death's devastation

It was fun to make as there's a great freedom in working on this scale, in four parts, and it's new for me to make something where I can never see the whole thing. I've made lots of triptychs and diptychs but I've never been unable to see the whole work at once. I could tell there was going to be an inbuilt disjointedness, but I really liked that idea.

MF: Why are you ending the exhibition with this piece?

CB: Everything is fed into The Triumph of Death, and it is pretty apocalyptic. I think I just wanted to paint as if I had nothing to lose. I'm a big, old, cheesy painter who wants to paint things to do with death and destruction, and this seemed the perfect place to do that.

MF: I'm so excited about this show, about the way this entirely new body of work responds to the Palace's collection, to what Blenheim represents culturally, but also addresses themes of nostalgia – from your memories of your English childhood to the line between patriotism and nationalism and how these slippery notions are shaping England today. You could say that the whole exhibition is about England past, England future and England imagined.

But I'd like to end by going back to the original mission of Blenheim Art Foundation, and ask how it was to work for a space so different and so much more loaded than the usual white cube of contemporary art?

CB: To be honest, I tried not to think about it too much in case I got stage fright. Perhaps it would have been easier if I were the kind of artist who said, 'give me the dimensions and I'll make a painting for that space'. I made works that didn't make the cut, I made things I got rid of and I made works that are still ongoing, so basically I started a lot of things in a very free way, up in the air, and then, as time went by, we pinned things down: 'Yes, that would be great for Blenheim'.