

# BACK TO BACK BALLOONS MATT LIPPIATT IN CONVERSA- TION WITH ANSEL KRUT

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**Matt Lippiatt:** How do your images come about?

**Ansel Krut:** I start by sketching fairly randomly. At a certain point a sketch becomes 'sticky'. For some reason it's holding my attention. Then I'll try to develop it as another drawing, or a colour study, and then eventually into my prime objective, which is a painting. The process is always to test an image until I feel confident it's got legs, then take it into a more finished state. I don't want to make the so-called searching painting, where you find the image in the making of the painting.

**ML:** The famous 'hard-won image'?

**AK:** Yes. My images are hard-won, but they're hard-won before I get to making the final painting. I want to do as much of the thinking and the fighting before I get there, because doing the final painting is difficult enough in itself. The idea of the hard-won image, or at least parading the fight, for me, can become a little over worthy.

**ML:** Descriptions of your work often mention your use of art historical style references. Is that a premeditated strategy?

**AK:** No, it isn't a strategy. I'm not strategic.

**ML:** So in the 1990s – when you made

paintings in a style that recalled Goya – you didn't think of that as postmodern pastiche?

**AK:** No, I was very unaware as a young painter. Had I stepped back and thought it through, I don't think I'd have pursued it the way I did. It was almost unthinking, because for me, painting was essentially a fairly primitive urge, driven by needs. It still is. If I try to pin that down too clearly it dissipates.

**ML:** No strategic referencing then.

**AK:** The idea of referencing is fraught for me. It can go two ways: it can be erudite or it can be overly academic. For myself, it's not a ploy, just part of the conversation I have in my head with other artists when I'm painting: it's there in the background, as scenery – a sort of backdrop. Some of the best things I saw at the Venice Biennale recently were sculpted heads by Nichole Eisenman. They were very indebted to Picasso and Max Ernst but not bogged down by that, that's the important thing. You are always in conversation with other people's art and art history, I guess, the thing is not to be too trapped by it.

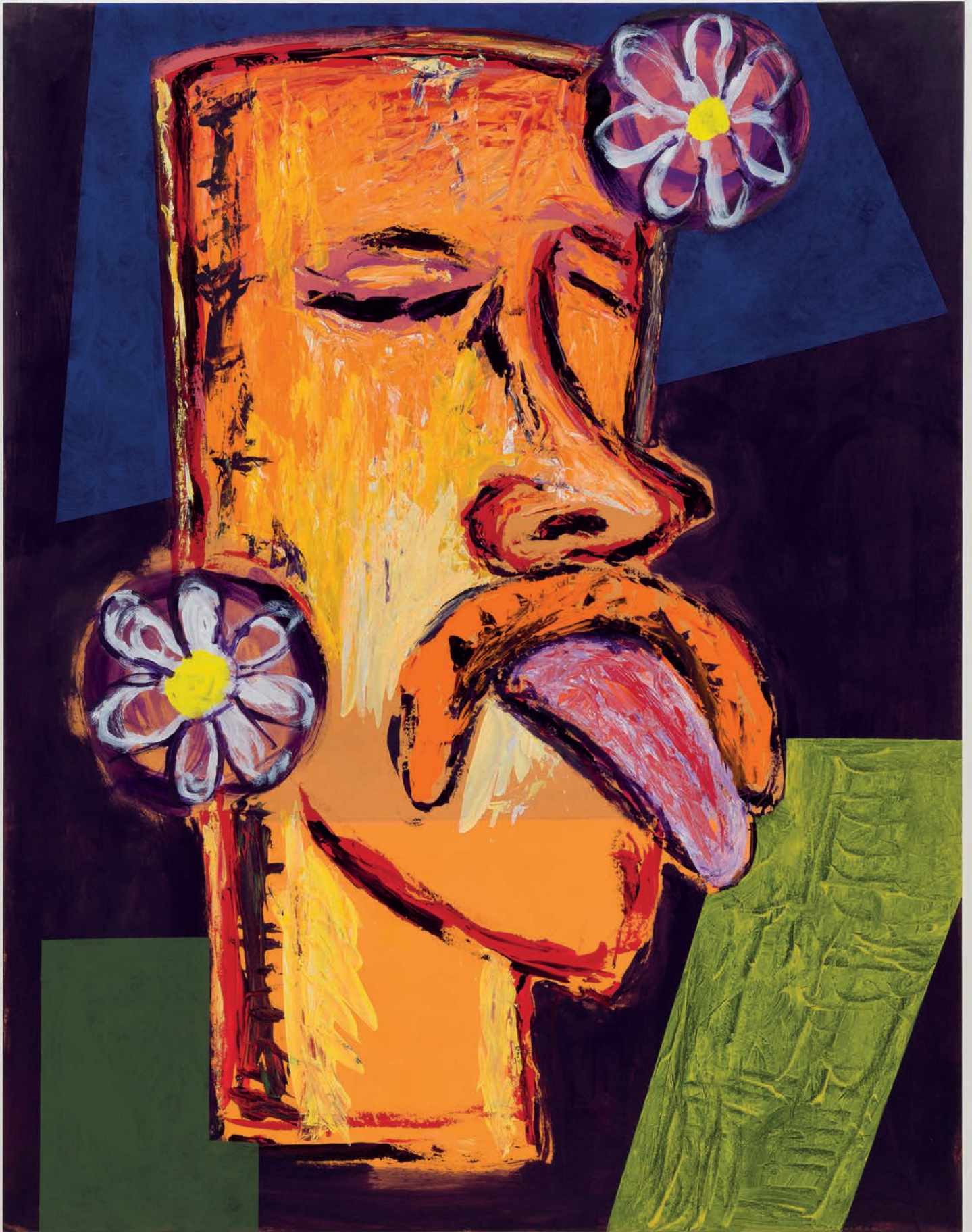
**ML:** What's been your approach with the recent work?

**AK:** I've tried to mix things up a little. I made many of these new paintings in Los Angeles in a live/work studio – a situation that I haven't been in for some time. I wore the overalls, I pumped up the music, I worked through the night, I performed the 'artist', or one kind of artist at least. I wanted a fresh attitude. I seem to need to reset my approach to painting every now and again. The last time was when I was about forty. I'd been asked to do an exhibition and I could predict what the work would look like and the thought both panicked and bored me. I remember thinking that if I was hit by a bus that's the only kind of work I would have done.

**ML:** And the flatter colours and black-outlined drawing came in, in the early 2000s?

Opposite:  
**Dead Hippy (after Thek)**  
2018  
Acrylic on paper stretched on board  
180.3 x 139.7 cm

Photo by Pierre Le Hors  
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery







**AK:** Yes. It seemed from the outside like a big change and I was hammered for it. Everybody told me I was being nuts. The galleries I was showing with didn't want anything more to do with me, my friends told me I was crazy, I was very broke, but I felt utterly free of anyone else's expectations.

**ML:** In your *Cut Flowers* exhibition (2016), there were familiar elements – outlined objects in close-cropped compositions – but they were combined with variations in style, including feathery brushy renderings of petals. With this new exhibition you're introducing different variations again, and these seem to be deliberately more awkward, or blunt, or challenging.

**AK:** It might be that the current work is, in a way, a response to the *Cut Flowers* show. The motivations for the *Cut Flowers* paintings were emotionally and personally felt. There was an elegiac quality to them. They were a little bit about growing up in South Africa, and a lot about my late wife. It was emotionally complex, and the paint embodied those feelings in a very material way. With this newer body of work, *Back to Back Balloons*, I've shifted my attitude to the paint. It's not a conceptual project, rather, I'm asking the paint to behave differently to suit a different purpose, and the paint handling is more discordant, less palatable. The challenge and bluntness you mention is in very obvious contrast to the lushness of the flower paintings. Someone wrote to me about the new paintings to say that "the distance between plan and execution" comes across as "nastily pure." And someone else said they have a "fuck you" quality. Since both of these people are good friends and excellent painters I'm taking their comments as supportive ones.

**ML:** You spoke about giving yourself "permission" to do certain things in these paintings, for example, the mis-matched colour correction in *Cowboy Shirt* (2017).

**AK:** In my heart of hearts I'm a very polite formalist. I impose a ridiculous painterly etiquette on myself, rules of good behaviour, so that kind of impropriety, mis-matching colour correction say, really resonates. I admire artists like Dieter Roth and Polke because they could be both fabulously formal and improper at the same time. Though, thinking about it, perhaps the most improper work I've seen recently was an El Greco – a portrait of his brother Manuso in a museum in Pasadena. The more I looked at that the more outrageous it got.

**ML:** Often a broken rule will initially strike us as 'wrong', then later, we enjoy it as a choice.

**AK:** Yes, it's a necessary deconditioning.

**ML:** But as a painter, you're the first audience for your work – the one to decide what to edit out, what to go ahead with. You have very little time to get used to something new as you make it. What initially looks wrong might simply be unfamiliar.

**AK:** That introduces the whole problematic area of self-questioning. Painting is an act of faith. Sometimes you need to test that faith. That means bringing all the previous certainties into question and shining a very exposing light onto them. Sometimes that results in changes in the work, and that can generate problems for you, and also for people looking at your work. They might ask, "Why aren't you doing the old stuff? We liked that." The comfort of repetition is very tempting. I think that's why a lot of people get trapped in a look, or a style, because they can compare a new painting against an old one that they know is successful.

**ML:** This brings us back to breaking your own rules. Can you give another example, in this new work?

**AK:** In some of these new paintings I've been working with a palette knife. To take a big lump of paint on a palette knife



**Almsouse**  
2018  
Acrylic on paper stretched  
on aluminium  
64 x 56 cm

Opposite:  
**Cowboy Shirt**  
2017  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 140 cm

Photos by Robert Glowacki  
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery







Installation View  
**Back to Back Balloons**  
4 May – 15 June, 2019  
New York, Downtown  
Marlborough New York

*Photo by Pierre Le Hors  
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery*



**Chrysanthemums**  
2016  
Oil on canvas  
132.4 x 122.24 cm

Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery

**Back to Back Balloons**  
2017  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 140 cm

Photo by Robert Glowacki  
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery

and wipe it over the surface is, for me, one of the things you're not supposed to do. The other is paint on black velvet! When I was a kid in South Africa, I'd go to the beach and there were these artists selling their work from Kombi vans. There would always be these rather lubricious women painted on black velvet, and the van next door would be sunsets painted with a palette knife. Even then I understood these were wrong; that this was wrong art. It's utterly bizarre given the sanding, scratching, dripping that I am happy to do in my paintings, let alone the amount of crap that I add to the oil paint, that I should hang onto this childhood aversion to palette knives,

but in my personal schema of wrongness, palette knife is in the wrong.

**ML:** This almost makes painting sound like a game – to make a painting that does something 'wrong' and yet it succeeds anyway – a painting that breaks the rules and gets away with it.

**AK:** Well, there are the rules that you set up as the architectural logic of the painting and the rules you use for yourself to stop you going off the rails. However personal they might be there are always parameters. There's a YouTube interview with the Belgian painter Walter Swennen showing him reacting very strongly to being told that the interviewer admired his painterly freedom and Walter responding that the last thing a painter is in a painting is free. There's a lot of scope for kicking against the rules though, that's a different thing, you can be as criminal as you like there.

**ML:** Do you think the idea of "good" painting has been destabilised? Since, say, Marcia Tucker's "*Bad*" Painting exhibition (1978), or Kippenberger and Oehlen in the 1980s, or Jim Shaw's *Thrift Store Paintings* (2000).

**AK:** The public spat at Manet's work, there are constant evolutions in what counts as 'good' painting, surely. I don't think Kippenberger was trying to make bad paintings. I think he was more interested in bad behaviour. David Salle called him a "charmed gadfly fuck up." I think what he did is maybe help shift the recognisable parameters of what constituted 'good' for that moment. I remember seeing those Kippenberger's initially, when they were at Saatchi, thinking, what the hell is going on here? Now I love them.

**ML:** Same here.

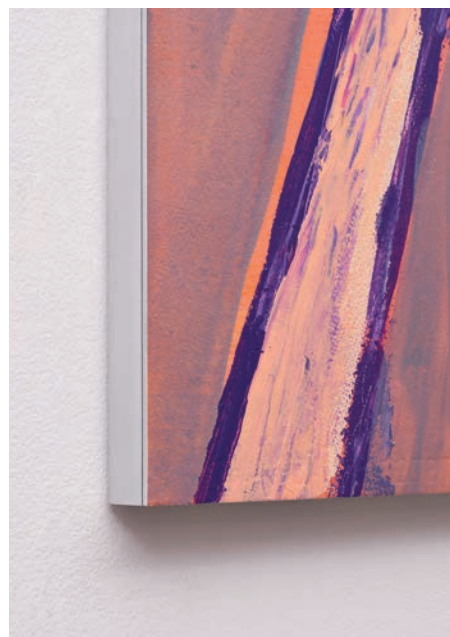
**AK:** 'Bad' attitude can make for good paintings. Actually that's a pretty romantic idea, the artist as maverick etc.

**ML:** Recently you've been using acrylic for the first time.

**AK:** I think this has guided the recent work. I was staying with friends in







Top: **Long Fingers Over Eyes**  
 Bottom: **(Detail of the mounting)**  
 2018  
 Acrylic on paper stretched on aluminium  
 64 x 56 cm

Photo by Pierre Le Hors  
 Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough  
 New York and London

Opposite:  
**Ripley's Believe It or Not! #3 Cover**  
 January, 1954

Harvey Comics

L.A., and they had acrylic paints there. I thought, it's here so let's have a go. Previously, I really didn't like acrylic. It's plastic. It doesn't have any sensation. But acrylic is so easy, my God! You can get from A to B without any fuss. I started to make works quickly in acrylic on paper. Oil is so wonderful, sensual, evocative, rich. It wants to be space, or light, or flesh, or clothing. Acrylic doesn't have that. This is just blue. It's not the sky, it's not water, it's just blue. You can bring the other stuff in later. It affects the way you read the painting, and the way it's paced. You don't disappear into the painting. This blue can be an equivalent for the sky, but it's a very basic equivalent. Just enough for you to know. I realised the freedom it gave me was freedom from history. When I got back to London I wanted to try to get that same freedom in oil, that slightly less reverential feeling of history.

**ML:** So *Back to Back Balloons* includes paintings in acrylic on paper, and oil paintings on canvas?

**AK:** Yes, one group of oil on canvas and two sets of acrylic on paper paintings. The first acrylics I made in Los Angeles, on paper that had been stretched onto board, some of them quite big: 180 x 140 cm. The second set I made in London, on paper and then the painted paper was stretched onto aluminium. The London works were all smaller: 64 x 56 cm. The paper ground was a key thing for me, the surface gave me the right kind of feedback for the acrylic.

**ML:** I understand the properties of oil and acrylic are different, but I wonder how much your feelings about them are affected by an idea of oil paint as an older medium carrying the weight of its own history, and acrylic as something comparatively unencumbered.

**AK:** That's true. The acrylic gave me a feeling of stepping away from my rather po-faced seriousness about painting. Oil on canvas: it's expensive, it's time consuming, and there's a long history.

Acrylic on paper is what you do with kids, so in a way I was allowing myself to not take things too seriously. That mindset opened up possibilities.

**ML:** The London acrylics on paper are mounted in an unusual way.

**AK:** Yes, stretched onto aluminium. The person who did this for me, Tom Lindow, had stretched blank paper and photographs this way before, but never an original painting. The system is to soak the whole thing in water. It was a risk: the painting might well have been destroyed. The paper expands and contracts in particular ways, so he had to calculate the size of the subframe for each piece, down to the millimetre. It's fascinating, like handing an etching plate over to a printer. You don't know quite what's going to come back. The paintings are changed in a very subtle way. It separates the paint out from the paper, sometimes making it more granular, or thinner. Sometimes it looks like a printed or print-maker's mark.

**ML:** The aluminium makes the paper into a completely different type of object.

**AK:** For me, the cleanness of the aluminium edge does something peculiar to the painting. It presents the painting almost as an artefact. Like graffiti that has been removed from its original location and re-contextualised.

**ML:** It could almost be from an exterior wall, say, in a playground.

**AK:** Yes, or like those sections of the Berlin wall that turn up all over the place. The surface looks as if its been exposed to the elements, it's evidence of a different kind of history, which then becomes something about memory. *Alms House* (2018), doesn't look like the architecture of my childhood but the painting feels to me like a physical fragment of it, a chipped away bit of it.

In some weird way I think I'm less possessive about my paintings when I use acrylic. When I gave the paintings to Tom to stretch up I felt okay about handing them over, letting the image get

worked over by someone else. The other thing I should mention about the acrylic is that it works differently for me when I think of pictorial space. Acrylic is always on the surface, it doesn't want to move back through the window of illusionistic space like oil does for me.

**ML:** How about the objects and figures that occupy that space?

**AK:** I'd say that my imagery has remained fairly constant over the years, in spirit at any rate. These most recent paintings have an air of comic



desperation, I think, because I bolted unlikely elements together to see if they could co-exist. In *Cowboy Shirt* I put horseshoes at the end of the shirtsleeves, where you might expect hands to be. In *Head on a Ship* (2018), the giant head is both the ship's cargo and the presiding intelligence on the vessel. So the imagery is rooted in the real, or at least in something recognisable, but then extended to the point where the logic might snap. Some images are taken very directly from observation, *Dead Hippie (After Thek)* (2018), is based on a self portrait sculpture by Paul Thek. I'm

drawn to imagery that is a little off-key. I want the way the image is perceived, its psychology, to be part of the experience. I think that looking at a painting is an active process, just by looking the viewer becomes complicit in how the image is understood. There's no such thing as an innocent bystander when looking at a painting.

**ML:** This might relate to the story you told about seeing a Goya painting when you were... how young was it?

**AK:** I was about seventeen. It was before I decided to study art. I caught a glimpse of what I thought was a young woman and sort of fell instantly in love. What the Italians call *colpo di fulmine*: struck by lightning. It only lasted a second, then I realised she was a painting. I remember asking myself "How did the artist do that?" I thought that to get that amount of emotion into the painting, he must have been in love with her himself. I spent a long time trying to work out how he made her so present, how he jumped something from the painted into the real. **ML:** It's a very interesting formative experience. Any other early memories of painting?

**AK:** This wasn't painting, but I was very fascinated by the drawings for *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* When I was a kid there were drawings printed on the back of bubble gum wrappers. There'd be a description of some unusual or exotic thing, with a drawing to show how it looked. I'd think "how strange that *that* is in the world," but also, that "there should be a drawing of it." There's a very direct beauty to it. I don't know that I'd say the drawing style influenced me more than the idea – to use drawing to present something strange; reporting on the world... the strangeness of the world.



190418 [Double Diagnostics] - Matt Lippiatt  
2019  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
210 x 150 cm

Courtesy of the artist