

The Visionary World of

Chris Hipkiss

Alpha Mason

The dark world of Chris Hipkiss' drawings is a very different one to the quiet Kent village where he makes his home.

Nestling within the lush folds of the Kentish Downs lies the small village of Doddington. It is one of the few places in the county to have escaped the effects of both London's and Europe's encroachment. Within a nineteenth-century farm-labourer's cottage of modest proportions sits Chris Hipkiss - a man, it seems, spared from many of society's impositions.

Hipkiss describes Doddington not only as 'the best place in Kent' but declares that it is 'the only place in Britain where I would want to live'. It seems strange that location should be so important to this unusual young artist. His naively-drawn figures are casually attired in clothing suitable for a sado-masochist party; his backdrops and landscapes bear no resemblance to the real world, be it these beautiful hills or anywhere else. The harshness and violence in his works make it hard to believe that they are the product of this gently-spoken, good-humoured individual. When asked about his creative process, Hipkiss describes his drawings as 'just doodles, really', whilst being clearly aware of the impressiveness of the finished results. However, he categorically denies that he is, as others so often say of themselves, the channel for a greater force; there is no otherworldliness about him. It is difficult to see where the inspiration springs from.

Born in 1964, the youngest of three, Chris had a happy childhood. His family lived in the Western suburbs of London, but amongst his happiest memories are of weekends spent on the Thames. (His parents have always had a boat of some description.)

He left school at sixteen, with seven O-levels, to become an apprentice with his father's joinery firm. It was at this time that he seriously began to draw. His pieces were much smaller in those days and consisted largely of landscapes. Black birch and cheap paper were generally the only equipment necessary although a children's paint set, candle-wax and cigarette ash all made the occasional contribution. He also wrote a book which is a beautiful piece in itself. It tells, apparently, of another world - called Xoy or Soratomeo - where bloodshed, prejudice and hatred are unknown. The illustrations, however, conjure a far more realistic atmosphere than does the text which, as Hipkiss would be the first to admit, is a series of incomprehensible ramblings. Nonetheless, the ideas presented in this early attempt at expression are the key to the man's prolific output; while most children put away their 'secret worlds' when presented with the puzzles of adult life - not least the mysteries of the opposite sex - he continued to live much more within his own mind, developing his version of Utopia. At this time, I gather from a reliable source, he was very introverted and rather unpredictable in his moods. The need to get his visualisations down on paper was a natural progression.

Since that time, his pictures have expanded both physically and in their scope. 'I draw in every spare, waking moment that I have,' he says, and, judging by the quantity of work, this would appear to be no lie. His recent efforts include a depiction of Doddington entitled 'The Road', measuring three by eighteen feet, and one of London measuring twelve by five. He is currently working on a 'Lonely Europe' which will be five feet high and thirty-five feet long. Considering the detail of his tiny figures and monuments, it is not surprising that he does not expect to finish it until next year; 'London' took five months to complete. The sheer patience involved in the work seems to be a minor obstacle when compared with the logistic problems of putting together a piece of such proportions in a sitting-room that would have trouble containing a three-piece suite. Chris works on a large roll of cartridge paper, for the most part blind to the effect of the whole. Occasionally, he uses the village hall and lays out the composition to see how it is working.

A friend of Chris, when shown 'London', apparently remarked that it looked like Hell. When he unfurls it, with the assistance of Meryl, his wife, I can see what the friend meant. The sheer size and blackness of it is imposing enough, even before one takes a close look at the intricate towers, buildings, trees and vehicles. To study it in detail would take a good half-day, but it doesn't take long to realise that the major landmarks are representations of those of the



1993 LONDNI' THE HANDSHAKE (1) & OVERTHROW (2), THIRTEEN THOUSAND BI

above: London, detail, 1993 pencil & ink, 55" x 132"

below: Chris Hipkiss

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present day city. As for the population, for the main part they seem to be murdering or mutilating one another. 'The Road', which I can only see in small portions due to lack of space, is similar in its effect. He cannot display it in the village for fear of offending residents who may not register, to give a minor example, that the Swastika symbols adorning a flock of sheep are reversed. His use of slogans and expletives could also cause problems.

'My pictures aren't meant to be desolate,' he says. 'To me, they are images of a better time. If [London] looks dark and forbidding, but, to me, it shows the purity of

the aftermath of a holocaust. Women finally take power - although my figures aren't women - they're androgynes - they're innocent, but they're feminine as opposed to masculine. Physical gender isn't so important. In the society we live in, men always have to be masculine. In my pictures, femininity is taking over. The anger in my pictures is all to do with that idea.' He sees no hope for the world and its inhabitants whilst patriarchy continues to prevail. The reasons for his insistence on a relatively untouched environment for himself become clearer; to Hipkiss, the starkness and ruin of man-made development is depressing and counter-



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productive.

Five years ago, he abandoned his joiner's trade and the joint ownership, with his brother, of his father's company. He came here to live, while Meryl, a computer analyst whom he had married at the age of twenty-one, worked in the city and supported them both. Having more time to himself, besides planting over three hundred native trees in the village and starting a local environmental group, he began to experiment with different styles and media. His portfolio is very diverse in some respects; he has come a long way from his pure 'Xoyan' landscapes. One thing that isn't there, however, is a painting of any description.

'I tried working with oils,' he says, 'and I know that some people can do it, but I just can't get the detail. To me, 4B pencils are the only thing to use. Even proper drawing pens seem too much trouble - and too, contrasty.' In fact, he still uses inks to add colour which, to Hipkiss means silver or, occasionally, gold. Some of his works from a couple of years ago feature reds too, but he has since rejected them. The monochrome effect has become natural and essential. For a photographer, this wouldn't be a problem; for

Chris, he feels, it has been a major obstacle in getting attention from galleries, etc. 'My work isn't so permanent, but then, it can be reproduced much more faithfully and easily than most paintings. Because it is on paper, people don't immediately see it as having as much value as something on canvas - even though it may have taken ten times as long to produce.'

In fact, over the past year or so, Hipkiss has gained some publicity. Aside from local shows, there has been a London exhibition consisting of a set of thirteen small, commissioned pieces. These were based on the idea of a Medieval calendar (Chris devised two versions of 'December') and depict seasonal, everyday scenes as only this artist could envisage them. The gallery owner (Guaranga, Sweet Waters) advertised the set as being reminiscent of Brueghel. His work has also been displayed in New York and Bulgaria, attracting a lot of attention - and negotiations are currently underway for the use of 'London' and 'The Road' as sleeves for an album and a series of singles. It seems that, whether or not people take an immediate liking to Hipkiss' style, it is impossible for most not to have a good look.

below: Inflammation, detail, 1993 pencil, 28" x 41"

FORGET MY DREAMY. HEAVY INFLAMMATION



above: Chris Hipkiss Expo, pencil 170" x 235"

Chatting over a glass of wine, whilst five cats take it in turns to explore the new lap, I realise that Hipkiss is largely ignorant when it comes to the history of art. 'I don't take too much interest really,' he says. 'I like Bosch and Klimt, but I only started to learn about them quite recently. I used to go to the Tate Gallery a lot when I was younger, but

there wasn't much there to interest me. I don't often get ideas from what other people do; mostly, it's seeing something on the television, seeing a new country or just stray thoughts.' It is this direct route from mind to paper which has put Hipkiss in the category of 'Outsider' art - and which makes his compositions so original.