



Paintings of flowers and other still-life paintings in earlier centuries would very often contain a *memento mori* (perhaps a skull), which to us may seem incongruous – why add something gruesome to a beautiful painting? But it was a reminder – as if people needed one – that life was transitory. It was the artist’s way of saying, no matter how beautiful the flower – captured for ever at the moment of perfection – it would be faded by morning.

I was reminded of this when I went to see David Willetts’ studio in Westhorpe. David doesn’t paint skulls (so far as I know), but he does trace the cycle of growth and decay through many series of paintings, in particular of flowers such as the poppy, amaryllis and the clivia plant – as well as fruit such as peppers and pumpkins. Watching as David turns the pages of a folder containing pictures of the clivia is like seeing its whole life cycle develop as in a film. But what interests him more is not just the natural life cycle, but the experience of renewal. ‘Flowers are the things that come back every year – and every year I paint poppies and trace their flowering and dying.’

Moving Pictures

David Willetts talks to Penny Young about his collections of paintings

Each day he captures the transformations that time brings: ‘I like doing that, and though it’s relatively the same every year, I’m able to see how my own work has developed. Recent ones are very different from ones I did years ago.’ So it’s also about the life cycle of the artist . . .

Recently David has completed seventy paintings of a single amaryllis, tracing its development day by day – ‘but then we went away in the middle of it, so there was a gap. But in some ways the gap is interesting: not just the development of the plant, but my development as well, what changes I may have experienced.’ Do different moods affect the way he paints? – ‘No, it’s more how I respond to whatever it is I’m drawing or painting. You *are* aware of how you’re feeling, of course, but

as I concentrate more on what I’m painting, that’s the thing that becomes more important.’

I wondered if he had traced the ageing process by doing a series of paintings of himself or of someone else, as Rembrandt did with his self-portraits? ‘I did start to work with a figure some time back,’ David said, ‘but I became more interested in the light on the flesh and completed that series and continue to paint figures. I have drawn self-portraits from way back, but not recently. . . Also, you do really need to start early in a life as, unlike a plant, it takes a long time to come to any really significant changes.’ Yes, plants definitely sound easier from that point of view.

Alongside the theme of change and decay in the natural world runs a sense of loss. ‘As in life,’ David says, ‘the subjects in the work appear and disappear either by being a memory, having died or are transformed in time from one state to another. We are confronted as much by absence and loss as we are by presence. It is this intensity of material presence and loss that is perhaps a fundamental emotional drive in my experience of the various subjects that I paint.’

