



Untold stories

Jeremy Houghton, **British**, born 1974

Ally Ireson reflects on the life and work of the convention-redefining classically trained artist Jeremy Houghton

PAINTER JEREMY HOUGHTON has been appointed 'Championship Artist' for Wimbledon 2017 and the powers that be have told him that they don't want any 'behind the scenes' coverage this year. It's an angle that has clocked up a lot of mileage recently, so there will be no stringing of rackets, washing of strawberries or portraits of Djokovic's poodle.

Instead, Houghton has been asked to focus on match play. For an artist who says he likes to "tell the untold story", this could be a frustration. However, Houghton sounds enthusiastically undeterred and talks about an approach in which "the crowd plays as important a part as the players". It looks likely, then, that his paintings of

Wimbledon's six different finals matches will do more than straightforwardly enhance SW19's conventional sporting iconography.

POETRY IN MOTION

This nuanced attitude is one you might not expect from someone with a reputation as one of the UK's leading proponents of 'sports art', a genre not traditionally associated with subtlety. The Wimbledon residency is the latest in a sequence of sports-related commissions for Houghton, including being designated to help document the London 2012 Olympic and

Paralympic Games, Tour Artist for the Aston Martin Centenary (2013) and Artist in Residence at Goodwood (2015). As a result of these and many other projects, he has become known for striking distillations of dramatic individual and team pursuits: a racing dinghy cutting through explosive waves, horses thundering down the final furlong, a team of track cyclists battling the air in sinister, helmet-faced formation.

With an almost monochromatic blue palette and with bright white space (actually unmarked paper) seemingly having bleached all extraneous detail, Houghton's paintings are reminiscent of old photographic negatives. His images often look disarmingly historical; it can be hard to tell which century we're looking at. His 'already timeless' works seem to turn the traditionally gentle medium of watercolour into jet fuel for the iconic. It's not difficult, then, to see why people want Houghton to paint their events.

Houghton could easily concentrate on turning out more of the same and 'epic sports scenes' will generally be a relatively easy sell, but that democratic interest in the spectators as well as the players at Wimbledon suggests that Houghton wouldn't be satisfied with such a purely commercial and narrow practice. It may seem discordant given the human drama of his sports paintings, but Houghton also has a real passion for birds – specifically, for depicting them in flight.

This interest was apparently ignited when he began watching the local flamingo population in Cape Town, where he spent a number of years running an art school after finishing his degree in law – something he says he hated and did because art wasn't seen to offer "proper" prospects. His images of migrating flocks, which were a prominent feature of a 2014 retrospective at the Worcestershire

offshoot of the Ashmolean Museum, are unexpectedly quiet pieces with an even more marked deployment of empty space than the sports paintings. Houghton says that, in essence, all his paintings are an attempt to depict movement and that blank space is crucial given that movement, by its very nature, sits right at the edge of what it is possible to represent.

SAILING BEFORE THE WIND

It is his track record of producing striking representations of movement that apparently helped Houghton secure one of his latest commissions: Artist in Residence for the British team currently aiming to secure Britain's first-ever win of The America's Cup, famous for its head-to-head races of the world's fastest boats. Houghton has documented the work of Land Rover BAR, led by Olympic sailor Ben Ainslie, for the last year and will soon travel to see the team in Bermuda, where it has decamped to ready itself for the knockout stage of the Cup contest later this year. Despite having been christened with the auntie-like name *Rita*, Ainslie's boat seems to have been born for visual capture – a state-of-the-art poster girl for the exuberant potential of computer-aided engineering. The description 'fighter jet on water' doesn't feel so much like hyperbole when you watch this 45ft catamaran in action and, with its twin hulls connected to the water by only four spike-like 'daggerboards', the boat seems to fly as much as it sails.

A subject with this much natural dynamism, as well as the expectations that attach to a high-profile commission, mean it would have been easy for Houghton to produce painting after painting that shouted 'incredible', 'speed' and 'daring'. However, he was also interested from the outset in exploring the idea that "there are five guys on the boat and 150 people off the

boat... and it's the 150 who actually make the boat sail". As a result, Houghton went "behind closed doors" to create many emphatically everyday views of the BAR project.

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENTS

This interest in "balancing the story" was also engaged during two of Houghton's other stand-out projects during which he was probably doubly aware of the privilege of an 'access all areas' status: at Prince Charles' home, Highgrove House, in 2013 and Windsor Palace, reportedly the Queen's favourite royal residence, in 2014. These two residencies came out of relationships developed in 2009 during a commission to shadow the Queen's ceremonial guard corps, the Gentlemen at Arms, to mark their 500th anniversary. Houghton says that residencies weren't originally "on the game plan", but was conscious when he returned to the UK from South Africa that he had to "find an angle" and develop work he knew people would buy to make a go of painting full-time. As a result, he used family connections with the military to gain access and document the life of some of London's cavalry regiments –

projects that became the first links in the chain of immersive projects that have formed the backbone to his career ever since.

Given that Houghton is a pragmatist as well as an artist, it's not surprising that the images he made of Highgrove and Windsor include the highly marketable likes of gilded carriages, famous royal buildings, bucolic landscapes and men in uniform. However, these collections also feature the kind of unglamorous sights you could see just wandering around – a family of pigs, a woman tending a sunny vegetable garden, horses being washed down in their stables – so there is plenty of evidence of a life Houghton describes as "the one people don't see" alongside the readily iconic. The fact that he gives breathing space to the slippage between the popular perception of a celebrated place or event and its everyday reality is what ensures that his work remains more layered and more interesting than the label 'sports artist' might suggest. Although he is at the peace with the fact he produces work that "doesn't ruffle feathers", talking to him makes it clear that Houghton is not an artist content to roost complacently in any form of pigeonhole. ■

