

Michael_Nobbs_interview

Zoë Westhof, Michael Nobbs

Zoë Westhof: Hi, Michael. Do you mind introducing yourself?

Michael Nobbs: Hello. I'm Michael Nobbs, and I'm an artist who lives in Wales.

Zoë Westhof: Okay, great. I'm gonna be talking about your career as an independent artist, so would you say that you're mainly an illustrator?

Michael Nobbs: I think I'm someone who draws. I think my drawing does look a lot like illustration, but I don't generally think of it as illustration. I have a drawing background. Yeah, so that makes sense.

Zoë Westhof: So when you first started working as an artist, did you start off on a more traditional path, looking for someone to represent your work? Or were you mainly representing your own work right from the start?

Michael Nobbs: I came to work as an artist in quite odd ways. I originally took a politics degree, and much later on in life, when I was about 30, I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, and I had to give up work. At the time I was publishing. And I sort of had a lot of time to fill and not much energy to fill it with.

I started in a weekly drawing class and it kind of started there. So I didn't really think about selling work at all at that point. I was just making drawings. And then eventually I started doing blogging. That's when I started to sell stuff, when I started my blog and so I'm thinking it's not really traditional at all, no. That's kind of an odd way, I think.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, it definitely is a different path. So how long now have you been full time working?

Michael Nobbs: Well, actually only full time since September. When I started to feel a lot better and my health was better, I went to university and studied for an MA, which I finished in September. That was a two-

year course, so it's really since then I've been working completely independently. I was teaching and studying to pay the bills up until September. Then in September I gave up work completely and just work for myself now.

Zoë Westhof: Great. And what made you decide to go do an MA?

Michael Nobbs: I didn't have a BA in art and I felt like I wanted some sort of validation I was an artist, so I did the course. And oddly enough, now I've done it, I feel like I didn't need to. At least, importantly, it did give me kind of confidence in my own work because I did it. But not very much has changed really. I'm kind of back where I was before I started doing the MA in terms of the work, the kind of work I'm making, but yeah.

Zoë Westhof: Do they at all address the business of art in the master's program or do they not?

Michael Nobbs: Not really. We did one course and I can't remember what it was called now. "Official Practice," I think it was called, and it really didn't touch anything – I suppose it did kind of gear you towards more conventional ways of working, like getting work into galleries and stuff.

But it was never really something I was interested in. It felt like hard work and it felt like someone else's agenda rather than mine, which I wasn't very keen on. That's fine if you're 20, but I'm 40 and I thought I needed to get going really.

Zoë Westhof: Do you feel like working for yourself has given you more artistic freedom?

Michael Nobbs: I think so, definitely, yes. Well, I do what I want. Day to day I do exactly what I want, which is great.

Zoë Westhof: And do you feel like you need to work longer hours or work more on different aspects of your career?

Michael Nobbs: I honestly don't know because I haven't done a more traditional way of working. And I don't know what it would be like really. Because I'm still not 100 percent well, I still have to kind of maintain my energy very carefully. So I tend to work in the morning, have a rest in the middle of the day and work in the evening.

I don't quite know how many hours that constitutes, but they're not huge and I'm freed up. That's only about 20 hours that I actually sit in the studio working, I think. I don't know what other people do.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. So when you're not in the studio working – for example you have a really active blog and it looks like you've been blogging since 2004, right?

Michael Nobbs: Yeah, that's right.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, so I'm interested to know, do you consider that part of your creating your art, or is that more the business side?

Michael Nobbs: Well, actually, more and more I think of it as being art actually. I didn't used to. Well, it used to be sort of what I did from bed, and I really wasn't going out at all. I would draw in bed and then I'd post a drawing to my blog. I don't – then I could do it. Well, I couldn't do anything else, which was great for me.

So it was kind of an outlet at that point. But I suppose over time, the way the website looks as well is more and more important to me, and I like to think of it as each page being sort of like a piece of art. I mean I've got one right ____ that's kind of like my aim I think.

Zoë Westhof: I really was enjoying looking through it because I noticed you give pretty deep background story into a lot of your drawings. And do you get feedback from people? Do you think that you engage with people on these stories behind your work?

Michael Nobbs: Definitely, yes. Yes, I've met lots of people. And, in particular, when I really wasn't very well at all. I met a lot of people who suffered from ME as well. And there are people that I meet who are kind

of attracted more by my blog than people interested in drawing, I think a lot of times.

And I kind of made connections I couldn't have made otherwise, which is really good for me because I was very, very isolated. So it was a very positive thing for me I think.

Zoë Westhof: So when you did decide to make this into an art career, did you ever find it difficult to start charging for your drawings and to put a price tag on work?

Michael Nobbs: It kind of grew really. I don't know. I don't mostly sell drawings. I mostly sell books. And the kind of books that had a price to produce really. And I do some limited edition books, which I do charge more for. That sort of book pretty much has its price decided.

I work out how much it cost me to make and then put something on top of that. So I am quite lucky really. I don't have to make a painting and think, "Oh God, how much do I charge for that painting?" It feels more like it's decided for me, largely.

Zoë Westhof: Right, it feels more natural, I'd imagine.

Michael Nobbs: Yeah.

Zoë Westhof: So most of your income comes from selling books.

Michael Nobbs: Mostly, yeah, yeah.

Zoë Westhof: And I noticed you have that –

Michael Nobbs: And I do sell –

Zoë Westhof: I'm sorry?

Michael Nobbs: I'm sorry; I must have lost the thread. You asked a question.

Zoë Westhof: Oh I was just going to say I noticed that you sell also a journal, *Beany*.

Michael Nobbs: Yes.

Zoë Westhof: Is that a magazine sort of thing?

Michael Nobbs: It's kind of a little paperback. I don't know how to describe it really. I suppose you could call it a zine. We've don't call them zines really in the UK. I think it's probably called a zine. It's a little paperback book anyway. It's about 60 pages. And it was something I was making before I did my MA, which was quite successful back then.

And when I started to do my MA I stopped making it, so I'm kind of getting back into making it. I'm making the next edition of it at some point. And I'm really looking forward to doing that really. It's what interests – it's about my life really. I quite enjoy making it.

Zoë Westhof: So a lot of your work seems to be quite autobiographical. So I think that –

Michael Nobbs: Yes.

Zoë Westhof: – that must help make it pretty seamless when you're doing the storytelling and everything.

Michael Nobbs: Exactly.

Zoë Westhof: It makes it accessible, I suppose, for people. So, you have the blog and I know you're on Twitter. I think a lot of artists seem to shy away from words like marketing and networking. And it seems like now things like blogging and Twitter are actually more pleasant versions of marketing and networking and I'm –

Michael Nobbs: Exactly.

Zoë Westhof: – wondering how your perspective on this has changed over time.

Michael Nobbs: I love Twitter. Twitter's kind of my new favorite thing. 'Cause I can sit here in the morning, and I tend to look for, basically, Tweets about drawing links. I find artists that I like and I Tweet to their drawings online. I can spend an hour in the morning looking at some links and I can send those out during the day.

And it's a lovely thing I can do. It's really good for me 'cause I can find loads and loads of new artists. But also, it's a good way I think. I think if you give people stuff, they're much more willing to want to come and see what you do as well. So while it's not particularly calculated, that kind of works I think.

Zoë Westhof: Oh yeah, definitely.

Michael Nobbs: And I just love that about Twitter. And I think Twitter's so good for artists, yeah.

Zoë Westhof: Do you bring in a lot of new readers and people looking at your art through Twitter?

Michael Nobbs: I think so. And I'm quite new. I've been doing it for about four months now. And it's come around just as I was sort of starting to work completely on my own work as well. So it's kind of difficult to know quite which is which. But I do think Twitter does – or has made a big difference. And I've met loads of other people through Twitter.

It's weird, isn't it, because I went blogging for a start without really a media because you could write a blog base, and you know, stuff where people made comments and stuff. But it's still – in comparison to Twitter – it still took quite a long time, whereas Twitter, it's instant. I guess I still have got where can things go from here? Can things get faster? I don't know.

So I just love – just love that kind of interaction. It's just great. And you can dip into it too, which is wonderful. I can Tweet from the street. I can sit down and watch a couple of Tweets. It doesn't have to be something that has to kind of be timetabled, which I think is great.

Zoë Westhof: Right, exactly. I think that makes a big difference when you're doing your art or something. You don't have to put aside hours a day to get sucked into it.

Michael Nobbs: Exactly, exactly. Though you can be a bit obsessed about this kind of – it's just very easy. Yeah, completely lost it in. But I try to let it just be going on on the side — I'm just doing that. I like to do something that's happening while I'm doing things that I can.

Zoë Westhof: Now, going on what you said about giving things to people, I think the Internet seems to make it very easy to give away a lot for free and just exchange information. And I think that's changed a lot of the dynamics.

And I notice for example, on your Flickr page you have different images available and you have some downloads. So what's your philosophy about what you give away and what you make available for people to use however they want?

Michael Nobbs: It's kind of changing actually. I used to be really precious about what I did and I'd stick copyright over everything. And I when I see artists that do that now, I think of course, that's a bit mean really because people are gonna take the stuff if it's there. You can't stop them.

I'm much nicer, I think, to say help yourself. And I think if you build up a relationship with people that it becomes a long-term relationship. People are much more willing to engage with you. And it's interesting, I was thinking the other day that I think everything I've sold, pretty much, even books, I kind of sell to people I feel like I know.

I mean, occasionally people do come and buy something by just looking at my blog and deciding they want to buy something. But that's quite rare. It's people that I – I recognize people's names. I've spoken to them on Flickr, and Twitter, and my blog, and had conversations.

I was talking to a friend and saying, “Well, I only usually sell things to people I know,” and he thought that was mad and I couldn't make a living out of doing that. But I think, you know, because of the way the Internet works, you can know an awful lot of people, and it does it for me, you see, it's what works.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, it seems that the community aspect is really strong for your network. So do you mainly focus on Twitter and Flickr, or are there other social media networks that you use?

Michael Nobbs: I've actually only really started using Flickr again quite recently in the last couple of weeks. I'd almost forgotten that Flickr was there actually. So I'm quite interested to see how Flickr works as a social network. I don't really think of it as one you see. I kind of thought of it as somewhere you just put images, but I realized that people do talk on Flickr, which is great.

But blogging's really what I did and then I just started Twitter. And that's kind of what happened. And I've got a Facebook account, but it's mostly friends here that I knew on Facebook. I've wondered about opening Facebook out to people in a wider way.

But I'm not wild about Facebook really. It kind of just complicates it, whereas Twitter is just what it is. Twitter is just one thing. I think that's what makes it work so well.

Zoë Westhof: Right, cut straight to the interaction, yeah.

Michael Nobbs: Exactly.

Zoë Westhof: So on your website – it seems like you sell most of your work straight from your website or is it through a different service?

Michael Nobbs: Mostly I'm not serious about – again, I'm wondering how to go about this in sort of future times. But at the moment, I print most of the stuff I do myself and sell it myself on my website. I'm kind of thinking for my next issue of the *Beany* I'm gonna use – not Lulu, there's another one – Blurb, which is kind of a print and demand system.

You can upload the files and then they actually print them when people buy them. And they handle distribution as well as post out to people. And I think for me, that might work really well. I can make the book and not have to think about posting, 'cause I spend a lot of time wrapping things up and going to the post office. And that's quite hard work really.

Zoë Westhof: Right, I imagine it's quite time consuming.

Michael Nobbs: Exactly. So I like the idea of print and demand, so I'm gonna try that out next. I've also got two or three pieces of work with a website called Thumbtack Press. They sell prints.

Zoë Westhof: Thumbtack Press.

Michael Nobbs: Yes. Again, that was something I did a long time ago. Occasionally, sort of bits and pieces would trickle in from that into my PayPal box, but I haven't really pushed that. I don't have a link to it on my website or anything, so I don't quite know. Again, it's something explore a bit more of really. I'm kind of feeling my way at the moment I think.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, it seems like you're feeling your way pretty quickly.

Michael Nobbs: I hope so, I hope so.

Zoë Westhof: So as far as originals versus prints, is most of the stuff you sell, or give away on your website, it is mostly copies, and digital work, and prints of it?

Michael Nobbs: Actually a lot of stuff I make is what I tend to – I do draw on paper as well. I'm doing quite a lot of work on the computer. So it kind of blurs the idea of what is original and what is digital I think. I often print a half-left drawing out that I've started digitally, and finish it in pen and ink. And the original, you want a copy of that.

The other stuff, there could be as many copies as you like, really. And I'm sort of toying with the idea, especially with books, of making a very

limited edition of hard back, really good quality paper, but that'd be signed and editioned books.

So alongside the cheaper stuff that you can – especially if I do these on demand — so they can be bought online and get delivered to you. So it maintains the connection of the idea of something being limited rather than perhaps original, I suppose.

Zoë Westhof: Right. I think that the Web seems to change the whole concept of original for a lot of artists.

Michael Nobbs: It does. Yeah, it does. And when I was doing my own way I was really lucky that we had this huge, huge printer that printed – I think it was kind of just about five foot across at least. So it was too expensive to print lots, so you probably would just print one thing.

But it's not an original because, of course, you know you could make another one, unless you destroy the file of course. I don't know, I've never quite known how to think about that really with digital work. I've not really come to a sort of satisfactory conclusion myself about it.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, I guess you're kind of shifting with the transformation now.

Michael Nobbs: Yeah, I guess it's kind of changed things a little bit.

Zoë Westhof: So you said your income is mostly from books. And are there any other related projects to your art or something separate from the actual things you create?

Michael Nobbs: Not really. I do some teaching, though I haven't for a while, but before most of my income was from teaching before I gave it up. And I would look for more bits and pieces of teaching, or perhaps lecture, one-off things like workshops rather than being involved in an institution or full time, or even part-time basis.

I would take up some things, one-off things occasionally. And someone's asked me to teach a workshop on – actually it's a writers rather than artists one about how to use the Internet, how to market in sales and how to make

money on the Internet, which I'm now thinking about how I do. I don't quite think I'd do that yet, but I'm definitely interested in doing it. So bits and pieces like that, yeah.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, a little of small side projects. Have you found it difficult since going full time as an independent artist? Or financially, has it been pretty stable?

Michael Nobbs: It's kind of building. I mean I'm very lucky that my partner can support me up to a point. So when I first got off work, it didn't matter too much that I didn't have any income at all. And increasingly, I'm getting more in.

And my aim for this time next year is to be earning what I was earning before I gave up work. I don't know how possible that is. Well, I think if you picture an aim, often things I've pictured well do somehow come to fruition, so I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

Zoë Westhof: Right, and with all these projects going on. Yeah, actually, I mean you haven't been independent for that long. It's only April so I guess —

Michael Nobbs: Exactly, so it's just eight months, isn't it I think. So yeah, it's not long.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Another thing I was wondering is when you start on these online networks and blogging, is there a particular audience that you imagined connecting with, or did you think it was better to just put yourself out there and see who could relate?

Michael Nobbs: When I first started blogging, I probably did picture the kind of people interested in drawing would be the people that would come and look at my website. But it wasn't, it was people that had the same illness that I had.

So I think you can't plan ahead very well. I didn't actually seek out those people, but it just — a wonderful thing about the Internet is when people do find you they can tell other people. So you can't really decide where

that's going to go. So I think I'm just pleased at whoever comes along, really.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. And have some of those connections online led to opportunities in the real world?

Michael Nobbs: Do you mean in terms of selling stuff, or meeting people?

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, anything. Exhibitions or meeting someone through the Internet who asked you do a workshop, something like that.

Michael Nobbs: I'm not sure if I've gotten workshops and stuff out there. But certainly, as I was saying, most stuff I've sold has come through people I've met online. And I think real-world — physically going somewhere to do something — has really happened... I don't know, actually, that's interesting. 'Cause people do usually know a website. And, of course, because you're working locally it tends to be local people. I don't know actually. I've never been asked to go to exhibit in New York from the website, but I wouldn't mind that. If someone in New York asked me to do a workshop, I'd certainly go and do it, so that would be good.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, and have you done local exhibits or exhibitions?

Michael Nobbs: Some, but again I've never been particularly interested. I thought I had to do exhibit stuff. And I think part of doing the MA was about having two exhibitions so it was kind of the point of it, I suppose. But I was not really interested about and, actually kind of feel – when I first finished the MA as I was finishing, I was thinking, "I've really got to line up some exhibitions."

And I thought, "Well, I don't want to, really." I much prefer working on what I want. So I'm not actually looking. I have in the past, when I was sort of between when I first started drawing and before my MA, and I did probably three or four group shows. For a while I was part of an artists – a group of artists here.

And again, I think I'm probably just a bit of a loner. I do like being in charge of my own agenda. And as soon as you start working with other people, you're kind of caught up in other people's stuff as well.

And because I've always been someone particularly interested in sort of print, and design, and Web, I was the person that people would ask to make websites, and design brochures, and to make _____. So I was doing all that, giving off a lot of ___ and not really having time to be doing the things an artist should be doing. So I made a decision to withdraw from all of that, really, and be selfish and do my own stuff.

Zoë Westhof: That's interesting. It's a trend I've been noticing in these interviews is a lot of people have said that they actually just didn't want to exhibit, that they realized it wasn't their aim anymore. And I think that's really indicative of this big shift that the Internet is allowing to happen.

Michael Nobbs: I think so, yeah. I know – oh, I suppose with things like Flickr and the blogs as well, I mean you're kind of exhibiting all the time. But I do like people to see my work. It's not like I don't want them to see me.

It's just all the other stuff that goes around exhibits, and the expense as well, of course, and then the framings and stuff. You're usually getting back in to unpack it. It costs me lots of money. And then – it's free. I mean the Internet, by and large, is free. And I just think it's a bit of a no-brainer really.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah. Now for artists who are starting off – I mean you got a very early start blogging, but for artists who are already creating art but haven't put in an online presence yet, what would you recommend as the first steps, the first things to do to start connecting with people online?

Michael Nobbs: I think an awful lot of artists make a blog, just post a Blogspot blog, stick some pictures up and think that's it really. But it really has to be an engagement with people. I do think you have to get back to this idea of giving something, where often you'd just be talking about yourself and your work all the time.

Try to find a niche, something that you're genuinely interested in, something that you can share with people. And make that your focal point online. And I think that way, people will engage with you and want to come back and see you again, rather than just saying, "Here's my latest painting. It's \$600.00. Will you buy it please?" Which an awful lot of people do I think.

And a lot of people, because of the stuff I Twitter – you know, I Twitter drawing links – a lot of the people just send me the links to the stuff they're trying to sell. I just think, well, why am I interested? Unless I love it, why would I be interested in that? Whereas if you're sending links to other people that you like and we build up a relationship, I just think that works a lot better really.

So, by all means make a blog but think about what you're really gonna put on it rather than just for you doing work. I'm not saying don't put on your work and stuff. I mean do, but just don't make that the whole focus of what you're trying to do.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, I guess it's a sort of a way of building trust with your

–

Michael Nobbs: I think so, yeah. And certainly, at Twitter – I mean so many people send all these automatic direct messages. When you first show interest, they'll send you this. This direct message arrives saying, "Here's my stuff. Buy it."

And I say, "Well, why would you?" Why would you want to – unless by some miracle it's something I've been wanting to buy and I'm thinking, "Oh yeah, that's what I wanted to know. I'll buy it." But I just think that, you know, let's have a chat a while and see what happens.

Zoë Westhof: Right, yeah exactly. I guess, on a final note, I'm just curious if there's anything in particular that's been difficult to change or to process as you're growing your career online and with your art.

Michael Nobbs: I do think motivation's kinda difficult, and I live in a very rural place as well. I mean I don't live where other people live, so it takes me about 20 minutes to drive to a place where there are people. That probably doesn't sound a lot for most people, but for me it is – and on some days I won't do that.

So I'm relying on myself a lot, and that's quite difficult. And because – again, I'm not 100 percent well, I kind of have to manage my energy as well. So it's a balance between, you know, having a social life and having work as well.

At the minimum I'm kind of stretching a lot in my own work, which can be quite lonely, I think. But it's good to maintain that kind of momentum necessary to keep doing that. Well, I guess that's the saying— I don't know the words, the words themselves.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, I suppose it requires an active effort to balance that.

Michael Nobbs: Yeah.

Zoë Westhof: Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about or bring up?

Michael Nobbs: I don't think so, particularly. I mean I would say that I wouldn't want to do anything else or do it any different than I'm doing now. I do feel that it really excites me, the way the Internet's changing and the way that we can interact with people. I just think it's such a huge opportunity for the people. And I just feel really lucky that I'm kind of around doing it now.

I mean I can publish my books and I can sell them. And that's just wonderful. I mean even ten years ago – when I first started publishing. I just didn't sell publishing. I was publishing other people's short stories and it was a huge outlay to do that. I actually made a mistake the very first time. I printed this huge printout of books that I was convinced people would buy without really any way of selling them. And I had a miserable two years trying to get people to buy these books. And now, especially, I do think – well, I haven't tried it yet, but I do think that I could do on-demand printing. That's completely gone.

You can send off – you can make a beautiful book. You can home print it and the quality's great. And there's hardly any outlay. And there are just so many opportunities. I mean the only reason you wouldn't do it is because you didn't want to do it. It's just great. It's almost like saying no, so I just feel really very lucky.

Zoë Westhof: I get the feeling that you feel like you can try more things because there's not as much to lose when you're doing it this way.

Michael Nobbs: Exactly, exactly. And it's just great that – I'm very lucky that I've got the time to do that. I'm certainly not, you know, someone working full time with kids — I wouldn't have the time to kind of do this. And I'm in a very, very fortunate position that I can do it. I just think it's great that I can, and just that other people get to try as well.

Zoë Westhof: Yeah, that sounds excellent. *[Laughter]*. Well, thank you so much for talking to me. It's been really interesting learning more about your work.

Michael Nobbs: Great, thanks.

Zoë Westhof: And I'll be in touch to follow up on this interview.

Michael Nobbs: Okay, that's great. Thanks for your time.

Zoë Westhof: Okay. Bye Michael.

Michael Nobbs: Bye.

[End of Audio]