

UNRULY  
REFUGE



# D.J.M. Saunders

Solo Exhibition, Cardiff M.A.D.E. Gallery

*15.02.18 - 10.03.18*



# UNRULY REFUGE

*"An open-ended but emotional journey in line, colour and texture."*

It is rare to meet an artist whose practice has been made available to see across the decades, revealed and unwrapped on meeting, like treasures from a box.

It has been a privilege over the past three months to engage in conversation, to look at and absorb such an eclectic and prolific output as this. Daunting to select, process, curate even; what to show and what not to show of hundreds of works made over fifty years (from the mid 1960's to the present day) in a house in Cardiff; never before mounted in a single exhibition for public viewing.

What is apparent immediately is the hard work and dedication to the process of making this work; built of necessity and graft.

From early figurative works drawn from the domestic; including intimate and delicate studies of his wife (i), to more dreamlike summoning of figures

i: *Gill* (top left), ii: *The Players* (bottom right)



from a mythical other realm (ii), his range is extensive. From observations of social interactions on the street, this huge body of work in it's early years from mid 60's - 70's crosses the scales; from dedicated exercises in

draftsmanship; i.e. studies of ways of representing the figure - to intentional naivety of technique, almost to the point of caricature (iii). As if maturity or frustration allowed the artist to be rid of trying and simply exercise his expressive freedom.

The early self-portraits are raw and direct, unflinching and true, beyond exercises in style - they are often painted directly onto hard-board, with little mixing of colour, as if 'technique' would interrupt





the expression of a thought and moment.

Saunders' mid-period works (from 1980's and 1990's) are more complex technically; using mixed media on paper, a playful process of drawn collage began. Sketched from eclectic sources, these compositions of isolated objects and figures are removed from their original context (iv). Intriguing as lost personalities, seeking a connective narrative.



More than random collections of studies on a page, however, Saunders creates a relational picture space, just as a playwright would position characters on a



stage, positioned to tempt insight.

Saunders' work shifts again in the paper based series that followed in the 1990's. A mixture of drawn and painted marks, using gouache and pen on paper, they are more fluid; hovering between abstraction and recognisable forms. Complicated meanderings across the paper, they show a delicacy and calmness which defines this period, a connectedness to natural forms and traces of growth (v). An interaction between leading and being lead by the painting process itself, they evidence a playfulness and maturity in allowing the image to evolve; to see where it goes.

His most recent works over the last 2 years shift again into new and unrecognisable territory. They

are more immediate, as if he was compelled to make an action, a mark. The artist acts like a conduit or channel for dynamism; the marks' ferocious energy moves until it or the pen runs out. Using whatever felt tip or pencil is to hand, it's as if he is pushing to see how much can a piece of paper take. A tension exists between willing and letting the process takeover as a meditative action. What the gaps mean and allow, between an uninterrupted calligraphic frenzy of marks, becomes the aesthetic parameters of elegant gestures in felt tip, moved until they are



iii: *Neighbours* (top left), iv: *Teacup in a Storm* (bottom left), v: *Untitled* (middle), vi: *Untitled* (bottom right)

exhausted and scrubbed out (vi). Despite being fast studies, hundreds of which exist, there is a likeness to rhythm crossing time, music and stillness.

Seeing visual reference to Wols and Cy Twombly in Saunder's work, I attempted to underpin and extend our conversations about painting by discussing ideas of the artist Philip Guston; most notably the philosophical wrestling of the 'existential,' which I saw as common to both their painting processes. I lent Saunders the book (vii) where Guston explains the right of a mark to exist within the making of the work, of the tension between the desire to see a form, willing it into being, and the unconscious action. He gave me back the book, not wanting to be shaped by another set of ideas. Clearly, such ideas need to be arrived at through his own journey of self-realisation, not adopted or neatly boxed into a given concept.

*'Art has long allowed accidents and unconscious forces to influence decision-making. But these days I'm happy to let quite conscious ideas start a building process, albeit via a choice of materials which remains as instinctive as ever.'*

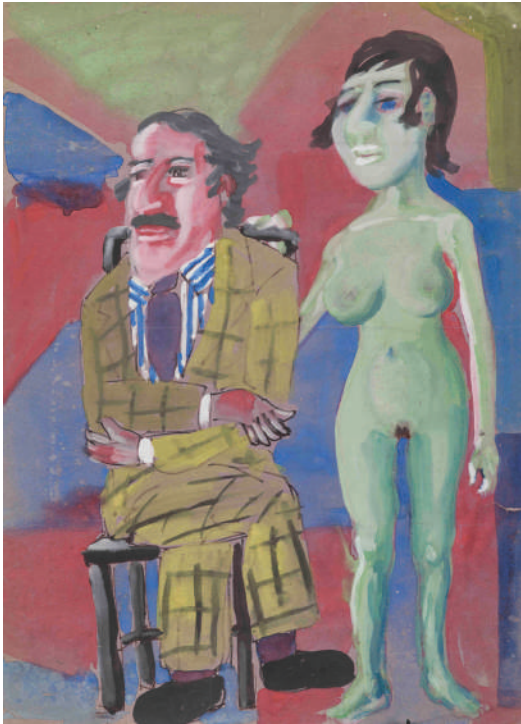
His most recent works consist of larger canvases where marks occupy areas of the canvas and colour is confined to a limited palette. *'Where she walks'* (viii) follows no pictorial rules of composition or

notions of the agreeable aesthetic. The colours seem arbitrary, save for the green area which locates the ground under a pair of disembodied legs, cut off from a different temporal plane to the picture, as if dropped in, different events in time, visible simultaneously. More like a map of an interior journey, linked by a narrative notion of linear time, the poet in him is visible. Images are more like thoughts, words conjuring states of being in time, locating points to being.

As he says, *'Wedded to the eclectic'*; an 'event' is always central to his work, some feeling of drama.



The most difficult work to process as curator; were the studies of the female figure; not those drawn from life (which I chose to include because of their merit as drawings), but others sourced from magazines in the 1970's and eighties, where the position of the figure as erotic object is evident. In a post-feminist world, where the objectification of women and the role of the female nude in art historically and presently is a matter of socio-political debate; these works found their place within the exhibition, for several reasons; Saunders interestingly and actively provides a context to such works, through acknowledging his own position of 'male gazer' within the work itself. *'Noticeboard'* (ix), is a collection of several



sketched nudes, pasted onto a board. Some of the drawings are overtly figures of fantasy, comic even, but crucially within these 'pin-ups'; the artist places a pastel portrait of a man in a suit and tie, looking up at the nudes. It's incongruence is alarming and totally re-positions the artist; not as apology, more as confronting his own place; as if asking whether

image x: *Rank* (top left)

he belongs among the ranks of the gawping male. And as we the audience, view the voyeur - the power balance is overtly turned. Again in 'Rank' (x) the man sits cross-legged, dressed in suit and tie, while his naked green companion with inflated breasts stands by his side. It is unnerving, strange to witness the imbalance in their states; whilst the female is green, naked and alien, it is the sitter who seems most odd. In today's world these power dressers, assuming power within their clothes, could be a Trump or a Weinstein. Within the exhibition, these works display an honesty in his being; a personal and intellectual response to the female body pictorially, not just as an anatomical exercise.

Saunders admits to a fierce work ethic, as if to counter any trace of self-indulgence, simultaneously un-apologetic of his engagement in emotional self-exploration, alert to the terrifying self-exposure of making his work.

Facing each piece of paper, the blank canvas is a trial, a battle it seems, but one wrought with the freedom and purity allowed through a conscious and circumstantial pursuit of his practice, unhindered by reference through an art education to what has gone before or any academic context, other than that which he places upon it.

His medium is what is to hand and his subject the personal, politics, how he feels, what he

needs to work through, translated through an emotional rhythm.

*'A balance between brutality and delicacy'* is how he describes his latest work, more akin to a piece of music. Saunders is also an accomplished musician, composer and writer. In whatever capacity he chooses to create works; they are objects of necessity - this is a life's work which continues because he must, not because he ought to or would wish to make work of a certain kind to please an audience and buyer. A frantic playground in which he can exercise and exorcise his thoughts, feelings and concerns; he makes work as a sentient, emotional being who exists through action as acknowledgement. To not do so, would be the end.

Zoë Gingell, *MADE Gallery*



EARLY WORKS



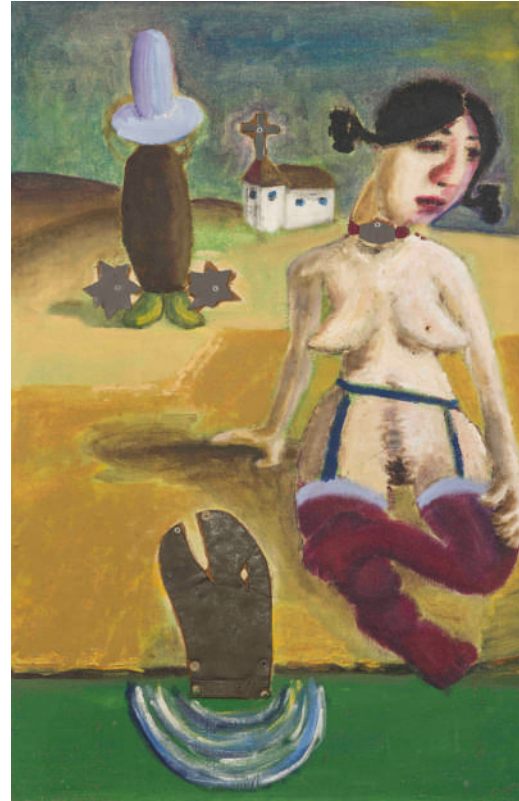
*The Players*, 1972 Acrylic on board (48cm x 44cm)



*The Magician*, 1972 Pastel on board (62cm x 60cm)



*Waking Dream*, 1972 Acrylic on hardboard (90cm x 60cm)



*Apparently Passive Lover*, 1972  
Acrylic on hardboard and tin assemblage (92cm x 61cm)



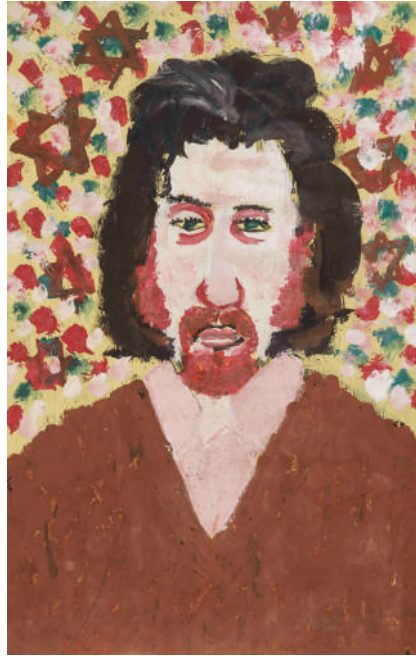
*Woman Smoking*, 1980 Pastel on paper (30cm x 21cm)



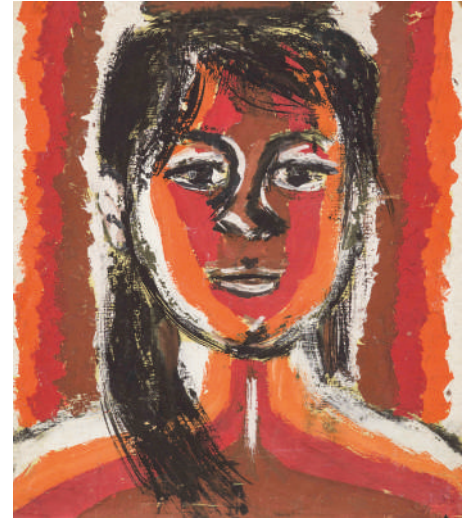
*The Nest*, 1969 Oil on hardboard (39.5cm x 29.5cm)



*N.M.*, 1972 Acrylic on hardboard (46.5cm x 33.5cm)



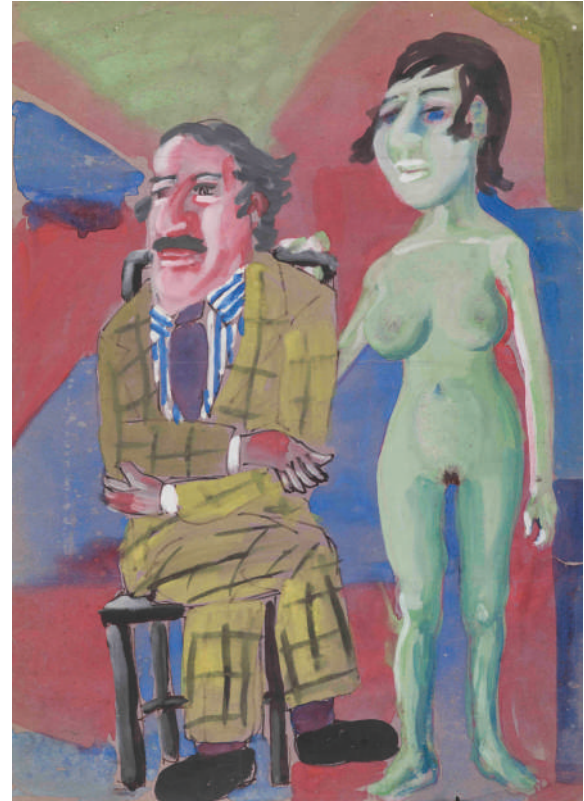
*David*, 1970 Paint on board (43cm x 27.5cm)



*Gill*, 1970 Poster paint on board (30.5cm x 25.5cm)



*Noticeboard*, 1973 Pastel on noticeboard (54cm x 54cm)



*Rank*, 1973 Gouache on paper (60cm x 42cm)



*Untitled, 1969* Mixed media on card (25cm x 19cm)



*Untitled, 1969* Mixed media on card (14.5cm x 14.5cm)



*Morning*, 1995 Gouache on paper (50cm x 40cm)



*Untitled*, 1978 Mixed media on card (30cm x 21cm)



MID WORKS



*Pillow Moon - Pair Assemblage*, 1993/1994 Mixed media on paper (49cm x 40cm)

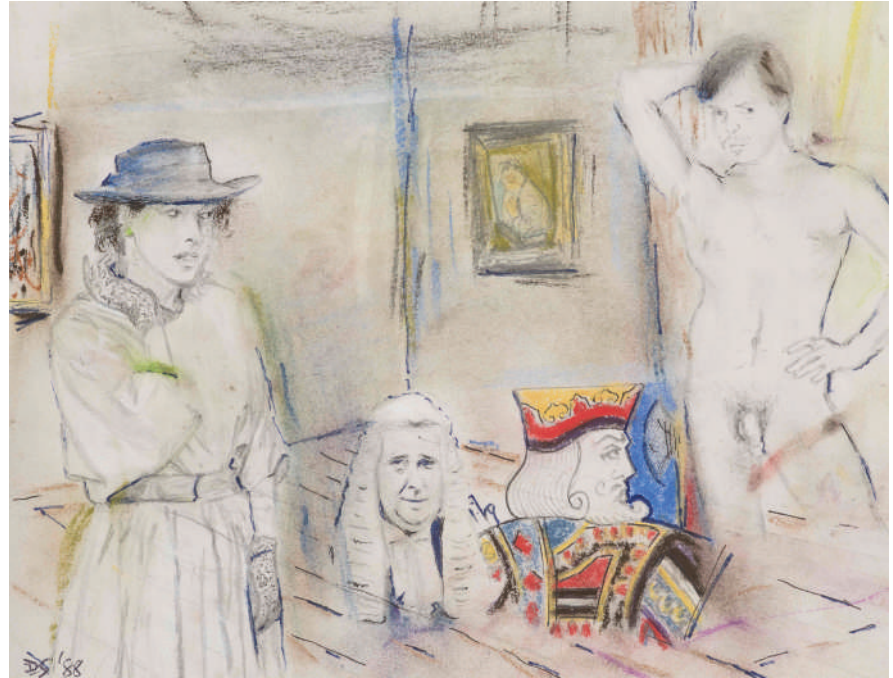




*Untitled*, 1980 Pastel on paper (30cm x 21cm)



*Portrait of S*, 1995 Gouache on paper (30cm x 20cm)



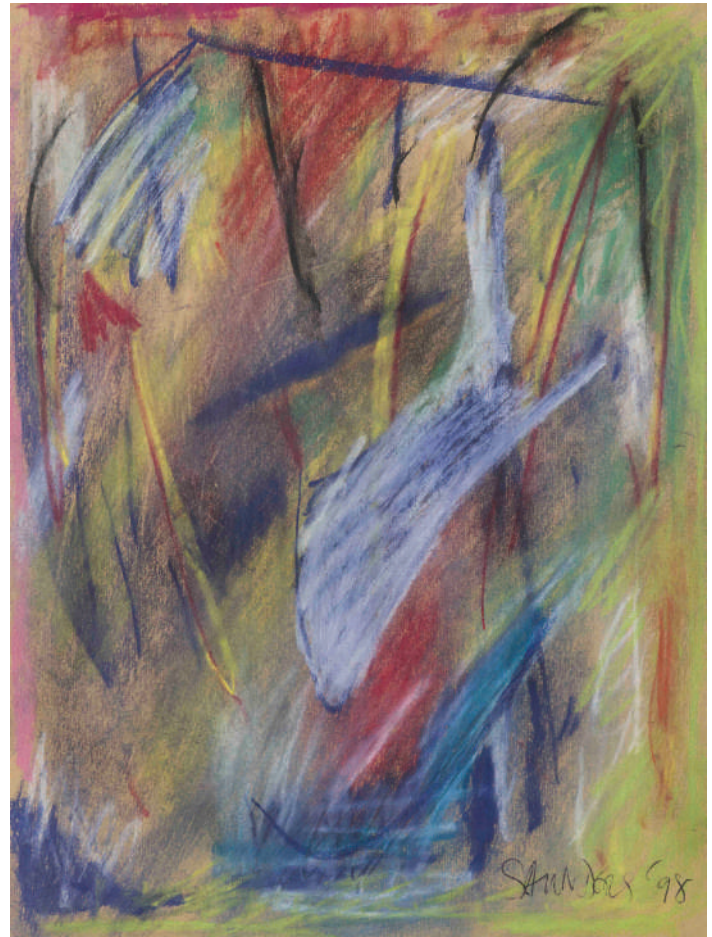
*Something About a Jack*, 1988 Pastel on paper (25.5cm x 19.5cm)



*Teacup in a Storm*, 1989 Pastel on paper (30cm x 23cm)



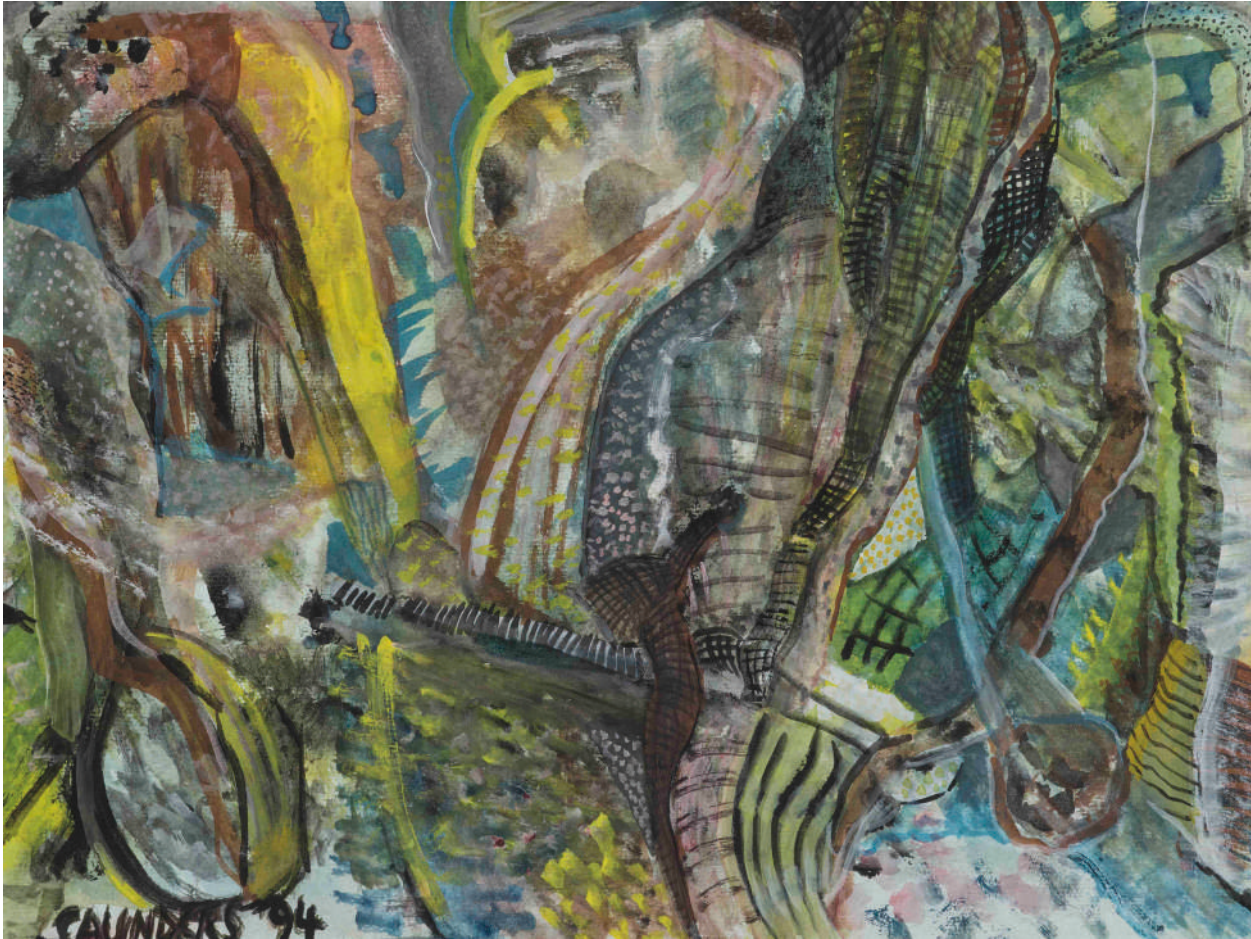
*Day Forest 2, 1999* Pastel on paper (35.5cm x 25.5cm)



*Falling, 1998* Pastel on paper (30cm x 23cm)



*Gnarled*, 1994 Pastel on paper (31cm x 23cm)



*Watery Grave*, 1994 Gouache on paper (30cm x 22.5cm)





*Untitled, 1994* Gouache on paper (31.5cm x 24cm)



*Untitled, 1995* Gouache on paper (31.5cm x 24cm)



*Rock-Eating Sea*, 1995 Mixed media on paper (50cm x 41cm)



*Untitled*, 1995 Mixed media on card (60cm x 42cm)

RECENT WORKS



*Untitled, 2017* Mixed media on card (60cm x 42cm)



*This Fine Weather, 2017* Mixed media on canvas (102cm x 102cm)



*Moyet, 2017* Mixed media on paper (42cm x 30cm)



*Untitled, 2017* Mixed media on paper (30cm x 21cm)



*A Brief History of the Front Room*, 2017 Mixed media on canvas (99cm x 99cm)



*Two faces, 2006* Mixed media on paper (29cm x 20cm)

## Cardiff M.A.D.E Gallery

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