

Biddy Peppin  
Edited transcript

Welcome to the first podcast of Emerging Voices series, Conversations with Older Women. I'm Rose Levinson, and I'm happy to be presenting Biddy Peppin, 82 year old artist and art historian. Biddy begins by speaking about her work.

I studied painting for my first degree. Then I was told pretty firmly that women's creativity is almost always due to a frustrated maternal instinct. And that chimed with everything that we knew in the 60s, everything that I'd ever read. This was in 1962 and 63. Feminism wasn't even on the horizon. So I sort of drifted away from practice. I never completely stopped painting, but did largely. And when I did paint, it was mostly holiday landscapes. I ended up lecturing in History of Art at a new university. Then I retired, and it was the great opportunity to start painting again, which is what I've been doing since 2004, more or less full-time.

At the time that I more or less stopped painting, I was working in an abstract way. And I always thought that's what I would go back to. But in fact, I found that the objects that surrounded me in the world, which are mostly decayed secondhand, crusty, discarded, useless, are still more interesting in their appearance than any shapes or forms that I could invent or imagine. So my work since 2004 has almost always contained recognizable objects, which I assemble in ways that I don't really feel I have complete control over. They kind of put themselves side by side in paintings. And I hope, well, I think when I look at them afterwards, I realise that quite often they reflect current anxieties or current thoughts on the state of the world or things that are going on around. So I never think of them as still lives.

Is there any way in which being older influences what you do?

Oh, yes. When I was 75, I kind of felt it was a tipping point. You know, 75 is the moment at which one may be going to leave the plateau. The way forward is going to go downhill either slowly or quickly. One doesn't know. And indeed, I think it's turned out to be the case. You kind of go on much as you are till 75, or at least I did. And then since then, all the little niggly things that you're vaguely aware of, but haven't had to pay any attention to, start exacerbating. So I now feel physically quite a lot older than I did 6 years ago.

How does being old impact what you're doing now? I use the word 'old' deliberately because I think we tend to shy away from it.

Well, I have slightly less stamina. I used to be able to work longer, and I'd paint standing up and I used to be able to paint for four hours on a stretch. Now I get pretty tired after three or even two and a half hours. All sorts of things like lack of focus. I definitely get brain fog from time to time. And I spend more time going back over paintings. I've also made some of my work richer, and given them greater depth. I've become much more interested in colour over the last few years, which is kind of odd because my eyesight's gradually deteriorating. But I discovered artist colours a few years ago.

What is that?

Good quality, expensive paints. Instead of what was called student colours. And I always thought, well, you know, I'll never stop being a student. So student colours are fine. But actually, then I discovered by chance from finding an old tube of an artist colour that has actually now been discontinued that it's incredibly beautiful and presents a sort of 18th century colour. And I realised there was this extraordinary colour, and I thought, well, this is an artist's colour. It says so on the tube. So that must make it worth the extra money.

You were alluding to your eyes not being strong. And I know from conversations we've had that your eyesight is fading. How do you deal with this most precious part of you?

Well, it's an interesting kind of progressive blindness because it happens in patches. And I've got a thing called glaucoma. And that means that some bits of your eye just shut down, but other bits remain pretty good. I'm sure it affects the way that I very often paint objects against a flattish background. I think I would find painting a landscape extremely difficult now, just because the land in a landscape is so much to look at. I have to look at things bit by bit. I have to focus on one thing, then on another thing, rather than being able to see the whole lot as I used to be able to do when I had 20/20 vision.

So what's going on with your eyes changes your gaze, and you adapt your work to that shifted gaze. But there's also strengths in it.

Yes. I mean, one just has to work with what one's got.

As I'm old now, I question what I have and do not have and how I put the pieces together. To whom do you talk about being old? Do you share your concerns with friends?

Well, obviously, David [husband] and I talk about it. And he's a year and a half younger than me. Things are kicking in for him as well. We try to keep each other up to the mark. He tells me if I repeat myself and so on, which I'm a bit inclined to do, I'm afraid. And then my sister lives next door. She's three years younger than me, so she's now 78.

Do you feel old?

Well, it's interesting, isn't it? Because in some ways, you have a lot of freedoms being old. You can wear and say what you like. You can accept when people give up their seat in the tube--even young women--and you accept gratefully. I do tend to fall over but hopefully that's partly a vision thing. I think it's also partly just a balance thing because I've been sort of vaguely lightheaded for the last few years.

As you look at the arc of your life, what's the most surprising thing that's happened or have there been any major surprises?

That's an interesting one. My mother, who was a very controlling person and dominated my early life, got to nearly 94. So I always knew it was on the cards I would go on for quite a long time. My father got to 82. So I'm just coming up to the point at which he died.

And that makes a difference, that notion of how long our parents were around.

And two of my grandparents lived into their 90s as well. Luckily they kept their marbles. I'm not sure about mine.

Is there anything that surprises you about being old, about your thinking or your feelings at this age? Things you didn't expect.

Well, I didn't really think about growing old. I didn't have any particular expectations. I didn't really have a life plan. Things sort of happened, quite often unexpectedly. And I've been incredibly grateful for most of them. I've had a lucky life.

I think of what you were saying earlier about pre feminism. I look back on the 60s when it all seemed to open up.. And young women today--their assumptions are so different. They don't even understand it. It's so different.

That's so true about women artists. It was just kind of assumed that with one or two exceptions, like Barbara Hepworth, women artists were just not as good. You couldn't really be a serious artist if you were a woman unless you happened to be a genius. That was another concept that I'm afraid hasn't quite disappeared yet.

I think the idea of genius is one that should be absolutely thrown out the window, down the drain. This idea that certain people have this kind of God given gift that makes them superior to all others. This idea was absolutely predominant in the art school I went to. In fact, the book that I already told you about where it said that women's creativity is almost always due to a frustrated maternal instinct. That was true in art school. Art schools aimed to foster genius. All you had to do is to pick out your geniuses, put them in a white room, and the geniuses will flower. God, what about education? What about ideas? What about contact?

You know, the idea of genius as being this kind of special thing, belonging almost entirely to men, that just sort of dominates. And, this idea makes it kind of hopeless for everyone else.

And also, the gatekeepers decide who is a genius.

Oh, absolutely.

There are so many good voices out there.

Absolutely. I'm used to the idea that not many people are going to see my paintings. I'm not going to make it into a gallery during my lifetime. I'm going to leave the children rather a problem because the paintings are piling up a bit. But that's for them to deal with. I mean, I'm not going to fret about it.

And how has that impacted who you are now? Because being an artist, a painter, is fundamental to who you are and how you define yourself.

Yes.

How does being a wife and mother fit into who you are and how does that align with your sense of self?

David and I met as students. And we moved in together when we graduated and have been together ever since. Ever since 1965, I can't do sums. I know I can add it, but it's something like 58 years.

What's the best thing about being married?

Everything's good about it, really. We know each other extremely well. Even so, having said that, there are still areas of him I don't know. And that makes it much more interesting.

What about being a mother, Bidy? You have two children, right? .

Yes.

'Children.' There should be a different word.

Yes, one of them is 50 and the other 46.

How does that play out in your life?

At the time, I had never particularly thought about children. And then there was a moment after the second half of the Arts Lab [an experimental art centre] kind of folded. And I got very depressed about all of that.

I'd left because one of the people there was, I felt, completely unreasonable. I didn't know what to do with my life. And then the idea of children planted itself. So we had Dan, which was a kind of traumatic thing because he was one of twins and his twin brother was stillborn due to a hospital cock up. And then we had Robin.

I took being a mother quite seriously, but wasn't particularly good at it. But I'm so absolutely thankful that we did have them. We went to see Dan last night. He used to live very close to here, but now he's up in Crouch End. We did bond. We did. Although he had three months of colic. And he was wept over as well, because of his brother. So it was a bad start for him.

But he seems to have got over it. Dan and I have a slightly prickly relationship. That's because we're quite similar in some ways. But I mean, I absolutely, you know, admire and love him, and dote on his children.

And as a grandparent, how does that work out?

That's easier. We don't see that much of them, but it's always delightful when we do. I don't feel incredibly close to them, not as close as you are to your grandchildren because they live kind of up the road and you see them all the time.

When you think about death, how do you think about it?

Well, it tends to ambush me about 5 in the morning, usually.

That's the death hour.

One of the things I like least about being ancient is the insomnia. I can go to sleep at night most nights, but then I wake up at three, four, or five, and find it very difficult to get back to sleep. In fact, this morning I woke up at three and have been awake since then; more or less, slightly dozing from time to time. And it's at that moment--, not the fact of extinction, that doesn't worry me. It's just that I keep signing petitions asking for dignity in dying. If I get past it, I want to be helped out.

I very much wonder whether the Queen was helped out and I hope she was.

So you're not afraid of death per se. What are you afraid of around the notion of that and just getting older?

I'm more frightened of Dave dying first. I would hate it. I mean, absolutely hate to live on my own without him, after having been together since 1965.

Do you think he feels the same, Bidy, about you?

No, I don't think so. Dave's got a kind of core. He's got this kind of independent core of self that will allow him to keep going and cope if I die first.

What do you imagine if David predeceases you? What would you do? Or do you just kind of stop there?

I try sometimes to imagine how I would cope, where would I live? You know what I mean? There would be practical issues, and I try to address those. At the moment, we mostly live in the country about a mile and a half from the nearest place. And because of my eyes, I don't drive. So I would have to move sharpish. We were having long debates about it. We've got a flat in London at the moment, but this feels kind of wrong. And it's also expensive.

Do we give up the London flat, which Dave thinks he wouldn't move into if I die first, but I think I would happily move into if he died first? Not happily, but I would move into it. Because in London, I'm a full person, whereas down in Somerset, I'm this kind of dependent person.

His garden means so much to him. He doesn't feel really happy living anywhere without a garden.

And the London place doesn't have one.

It's got a balcony. It doesn't have a garden.

So Bidy, name the most important things in your life. Leave out people.

Well, as far as I'm concerned, a place to work is the most important. And a way of getting around without depending on others is important.

Would you ever consider going to a care home?

Only if I became completely incapacitated. And actually, I'd rather die first.

We think about death. It's going to happen. What else is associated with that notion for you?

Because I'm not mobile and David's not a particularly social person, we actually didn't socialise very much. But when I do meet people, around my sisters or somewhere, I just sort of feel that they live on an alien planet. My sister is involved with local things. She's a local councillor and she works extremely hard for the local community.

Is she your main support beside David? Your sister?

If we saw too much of each other, we'd fall out big time. But we know how to relate to each other in what is usually a supportive way. I mean, occasionally one of us will put a foot wrong and it's touch and go.. She's very pragmatic about death, and she sort of says, well, you're lucky to have got to as old as you are. I quite like that. She's 78, and her husband's now 79. As my mother used to say, it's the same conveyor belt.

So David is your main anchor.

Yes.

And what about other involvements beside art? You're very politically engaged.

I think lockdown has had a huge impact because before lockdown, I was a person who made placards, went on demonstrations and all that sort of thing. And then during lockdown, everything changed. And I now feel a lot less secure about going out and demonstrating for hours, going out and expressing my political views, being with a bunch of people. I suppose it's partly about being with a bunch of people and it's probably a kind of sense that because I'm so ancient, people are just going to say, oh, she's just a sort of old bat you know.

Looking back over the arc of your life, what would you identify as the biggest thing?

A very big thing for me was actually in my 50s, getting a proper job for the first time, a job that was kind of full time, that paid me a salary the whole year around. Because for many years I taught on American study abroad programs in London. And that was the gig economy. A bunch of students would arrive for ten weeks or less or whatever it was. And you'd teach them once a week for that time and then you'd grade them and then they'd disappear and another lot would arrive. You'd go back to square one. In between times, and especially between May and September, there weren't any of them. So I wasn't getting paid. I spent the rest of the year trying to build up because I've always been responsible for buying the food. Sort of saving up enough money so we could eat through the summer. David was always taking care of the other bills.

So getting your first job at 50.

50 something. I really enjoyed it. I was only there for about 8 years, but I had such a good time.

What would you counsel if a young woman came to you and said, should I have children?

I wouldn't attempt to try and influence them. I mean, you can't. You can't. People who are intelligent are the people who are going to be those who are the ones worrying about climate change. They're going to, you know I mean, we haven't got a crystal ball. We fear the worst. We also know that a lot of the world's problems are caused by the fact there are too many of us. I do talk about family size to young people in general terms.

What do you say?

I say, more than two children is a bit greedy because of the overpopulation of the world. If you limit yourself to two children, if everybody did that, then the world population would gradually decrease because not everybody has children.

I've been banging on about two children since I was in my 30s. But now that I'm old, I think about my grandparents. By the time they died, the ones I knew had absolutely very little understanding of the world they occupied. So when they gave pieces of advice, they made comments on the kind of things my sister and I were doing. They really had no relevance. And I have a sense that probably anything that I say wouldn't necessarily relate very closely to the mindset of people who are young.

For example, my grandfather, when I was going to go to University College, London said to my mother, oh, she can't go there. It's a hotbed of atheism. It was a completely different mindset. And although I like to think that I'm sort of in touch with a lot of the directions in which things are going, actually they must appear very different to people who were born in the 21st century.

How do you feel about being remembered or forgotten? Do you think you'll be remembered? And if so, by whom?

That's an interesting question as well, because as I mentioned earlier, my paintings are piling up. And of course they may just all get thrown in the bin, and if that happens, so be it. My painting is very, very unfashionable. I don't work in a modern idiom, and I don't use the media that many contemporary artists do. My work isn't time based, and it doesn't involve movement. Partly because movement is something I've always found very difficult to cope with in myself. But what I would like to think is that it sort of contains something that will be able to speak to people in future generations. But I don't know what it will say to them. But then I'm not entirely sure what it's saying now. I would like to feel there's something about the world that finds its way into them by accident or design, and will go on communicating with people if the paintings themselves physically survive, which they may or may not do.

What would you like your children to say about you?

I've never thought about that. I don't know., I say fairly horrible things about my own mother. So I've tried not to think about what they might say about me because I wasn't particularly good at it. I was inclined to be very bossy.

They sometimes remind me of the awful mistakes I made. And indeed, I'm one of these people who is constantly ambushed by dreadful memories of all the awful things I've done and said that were wrong throughout my life. They kind of pop out at unexpected moments. So the thought that people might remember me is actually a bit worrying. I've been doing quite a lot of research into Helen Sanders, the vorticist painter who was first cousin of my grandmother, so there is a family connection.

When I was first researching her, I was able to contact people of my mother's generation, the generation younger than her who were still alive and who remembered things about her. And so those things I recorded. She would have had absolutely no sense at the time that she died as a completely forgotten painter, that anyone was going to take an interest in what she did during her life or have memories about her.

And she certainly wouldn't have anticipated there was going to be an exhibition of her work at the Courtauld gallery, which there was in October.

[If you predeceased your husband, what would you like him to remember about you?](#)

David's quite inscrutable in some ways. He doesn't live with the past in the way that I do. He's not, he's not haunted by these moments. So I think if I die first, he'll go on looking ahead. And he'll, he'll take each day as it comes and he'll be pragmatic. And he'll say, oh, well, thank goodness she's not there to burn the sausages anymore.

[If you made a summary statement, what would you say to the world right now?,](#)

I wouldn't say something like that because I find it incredibly difficult working out titles for my paintings. And I think this would present a similar kind of difficulty.

[I think we live in a culture in which when you age, you are seen as diminished.](#)

Ah, now you see, I think in a way that's the advantage. Nobody's particularly watching you. So you can be as subversive as you want to. It gives you a kind of freedom not being seen. Being invisible means you can be sort of a backroom operator. And you can go on standing up for the things you believe in, talking to people if you think it's a good idea. You can just go and do things. One has this liberty. Unbounded liberty.

[That's nice to hear.](#)

And you know I don't really mind whether others pay attention to me or don't. I just want the freedom to do what I think is needed or is the right thing or what I hope will be useful or what I want to do or want to say.

[Other people's appraisal of you is not really something that comes much into your mind.](#)



You know who you are and we're all different.

When you think back on your childhood, are there any difficult memories?

I think I did the right thing by my dad, which was that he wrote in his old age, when he was about 80 and late 70s. He wrote down his memories. I put them into a book form, and my sister and I published it. My brother-in-law started a little press. So we produced 50 copies. I edited it and married it to the family photographs and all that sort of thing.

Did your dad see it?

No, no. I mean, it was after he was gone. He died in 1987, and I had just done it. There are all these sheets. Some of them are sort of different accounts of the same thing. I think there was a definitive version that got lost since his death before it reached me. But what do you do with all these pieces of paper? I mean, they're just typed sheets. I know that he sat there with his two fingers on his tiny little typewriter, spending a lot of time thinking about his early life. It stops almost at the moment I was born. It's not his whole life. It's 1904 to 1944, really.

You've given your father a little speck of the planet.. Anything for your mom?

Well, mom was difficult. Even while she was dying, she was trying to tell us what she wanted her funeral to be like. Actually, it was an awful funeral because we did try to carry out her wishes instead of doing the kind of funeral that we would have felt more comfortable for us.

Was it elaborate?

It just had a vicar, but it was awful.

And when does the image of your mother come up when you think about yourself in relation to your children?

Well, I know I'm bossy, but I at least I do try. One of the problems was she couldn't really admit she was ever wrong. And so I've always gone out of my way to explain to my children that I usually am wrong so they don't have to take me too seriously. And I hope that's made it easier for them to be themselves. It was very difficult to become myself because she took utter control over my life. It was only when she made a complete balls-up over something when I was 18, that it actually occurred to me she might not always be right.

What would you say to your mother now if you tried to talk to her?

Yeah, the funny thing is she left quite a lot of tapes about her life, and I've never been able to bring myself to listen to them. She wanted to be the perfect mother. And of course, nobody can be that. She was the perfect grandmother. She put a lot of effort into the grandchildren, all of them. They all loved her, which is good. I can't love her, but the grandchildren could. Rosie, my niece, my sister's daughter, said here are some of Granny's tapes. And I checked out most of them. They were completely blank. They were literally blank. Either they'd been accidentally

wiped out or she didn't know how to use the recording machine.

Your summary statement for the world was 'nobody's particularly watching you. You can be as subversive as you want to be.' We have to stop here. Thank you, Bidy Peppin, for a wonderful conversation. Here's to ongoing subversion.

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