

# *The artistic* mathematician

*Leaving a corporate planning job at Tesco HQ to follow a long-held ambition to paint, Dave Nelson takes an analytical approach to making his new career a success, as Sandra Smith finds*

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DAVE Nelson can't recall which side of the brain is rational, with a preponderance for numbers and words, and which side favours creativity and intuition, and nor can I. In a corner of HERE restaurant and bar in Berkhamsted's Lower Kings Road, we're sipping coffee and enjoying an impromptu debate and analysis of left-right career choices. Perhaps, we conclude, each of us is a mixture, with some folk never having the opportunity to discover or express their artistic nature.

The conversation is relevant to Dave's work, in which mixed media, quirky angles and elements of naivety merge. His distinctive style has already been showcased in London galleries. I say 'already' because this is where the left-right issue come in – Dave became a professional artist just two years ago after studying maths at university and choosing a corporate environment for a couple of decades. The past 12 months have seen the reinvented 51-year-old's first solo show and the sale of 25 of his pictures.

'I worked in operational research (mathematical analysis to provide a basis for management decisions) at Tesco HQ in Welwyn Garden City. It was quite an analytical career with lots of decision making,' Dave explains.



Above *The Monument* (looking south down Fish Street Hill) Below *That'll be £2.80 love* (Borough Market) Opposite St Albans Abbey

*'I am a great believer that you can develop talent if you have discipline and drive'*

Being blessed with natural intelligence is a declaration shared in a quietly apologetic tone. His academic ability secured educational and career success, yet an enjoyment of art, though unrecognised at school, had been a constant in his life.

'When my children went to school and did creative activities, I felt I was missing something. I wanted to be an inspiration to them. I had a hidden desire to do art which I hadn't been expressing. I am a great believer that you can develop talent if you have discipline and drive. This attitude has been an inspiration for me taking up art in later life.'

A career-changing opportunity came via voluntary redundancy. Skills developed throughout his former occupation, however, are continually put to good use, Dave says.

'My boss thought I was nuts but I drew up a business plan, read about the business of art and talked to professional artists.'

Initially in a spare bedroom of his St Albans home, Dave developed a mixed media technique reflecting his interest in transformational change ▶





– the ability of people, with sufficient desire, to evolve beyond recognition.

‘I’m trying to embrace change and be a different person, from corporate to creative. I’m interested in change both on a personal level and in our society and landscape, not just in three dimensions but also through time. How our minds see a place and how it is remembered is never the same as a static view. My pictures are memories of places, how I saw and experienced them on a given day. You hardly ever view a landscape from a single point, you’re constantly moving through it. Memories are made up of composite viewpoints and I try to reflect this.’

Each of his works – predominantly town and seascapes – begins in situ with hundreds of photographs of the same scene snapped from different angles. Back at the Forge studio in Digsweil, where as a member of Digsweil Arts Trust Dave now revels in a dedicated creative space, his printed photographs are pieced together to form a small template. From this a picture is built, firstly with artefacts from his days’ visit to the scene, such as a newspaper, receipts or coffee cups, layered on board in contrasting materials to create texture before the addition of acrylics. The results are vibrant, surprising, tactile and often energetic A1 or A0-sized images.

‘I work on board but I’m not making a composition out of collage. Once dry, I start to build up the image, initially quite crudely. Firstly, layers of paint are applied with a lino roller. I also like acrylic ink – a flexible medium which is more intense as a colour and also



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**Above**  
*Hurry home*

**Left**  
*Boats on Beer  
Beach*

**Right**  
*No we can't take  
the dog*  
(British Museum)



translucent so the collage shows through. This is particularly good for skies. Slowly I move towards the image. Acrylic paint or additional collage provides more detail. Sometimes I use a bit of oil pastel or pen and ink.'

He laughs as he reveals that traditional paint application tools such as palette knives and sponges are accompanied by more unusual ways of creating effects.

'I use Lego blocks – I love the idea of using a brick to make a brick!'

During our couple of hours together, commercialism frequently enters the conversation. Dave has a spreadsheet monitoring prices (he hit his sales target in 2016) and, while revenue was satisfactory, costs exceeded expectations.

A determination to turn his career into a profitable venture is key. The goal to be taken seriously as an artist and command 'reasonable amounts' for his work attainable ambitions. So far, his success, not surprisingly, generates motivation.

'Talking to customers when they buy my work is like being the centre of the universe. It's the biggest buzz ever.'

By the time we part, we have failed to crack the left-right brain conundrum. No matter, because this personable artist scores highly in both hemispheres. His creative skills complemented by a professional approach make Dave Nelson that somewhat unusual thing – an artist with a crystal clear vision of how to market his work. ♦

