

DESMOND MORRIS: The playful zoologist**July 2007**Published in *The Oxford Times, Limited Edition*, 3 August 2007

Desmond Morris is puzzling over the cover of his new book *The Naked Man*, a study of the male body. It shows a black and white photo of a rather curvaceous and feminine looking back. 'Is it male enough?' ponders the author; his wife has already told him that only women and gay men will be interested in buying a book with such a title.

Desmond Morris might have done better to draw the cover himself, or even get a chimp to do it for him. He is a sought-after and accomplished surrealist artist as well being better known to several generations as an expert on animal and human behaviour. In the fifties he began a research project to study the ability of apes to make pictures and even held an exhibition of chimpanzee paintings at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, later becoming executive director there. Although he has written dozens of books, his most famous is still *The Naked Ape* published in 1967 – a zoologist's study of the human animal. Written in just four weeks, the book became a huge bestseller, much to his surprise, and it enabled him and his wife to move to Malta where he painted and wrote for five years, occasionally returning to Oxford. He eventually bought a house and studio in the city, and in the early 70s took up a research Fellowship at Wolfson College.

Morris's interest in art began at boarding school and he began painting seriously during his National Service, becoming one of the few British soldiers ever to be employed as a full-time art teacher (at Chisledon Army College). Bracing himself for his first lesson, a life-class, he entered the room to find a voluptuous stark naked blonde reclining on a padded rostrum. "I was still only a teenager and lost for words," he said (despite the fact that one of his girlfriends was the equally voluptuous Diana Dors, the actress). "A certain amount of bluff was called for." Just a few years after that memorable art class, Desmond Morris shared his first London exhibition with Joan Miro, the Spanish surrealist and experimental artist, and two years later, in 1952, held a one-man show of his paintings at the Ashmolean. 1952 was a good year for

him – he also got married to an Oxford History graduate, Ramona Baulch, who has often worked with him and shared his numerous worldwide travels. He claims to have clocked up 281 foreign trips and visited 76 different countries. Having set himself the task of observing and reporting all forms of human behaviour, Morris thinks that playfulness is the most important aspect. “It gives us everything from literature to science.”

At Oxford, there was hard work as well as play, and the city has been a significant part of his life. It was at the Zoology Dept where he began research for his doctorate in animal behaviour, with a thesis on the Reproductive Behaviour of the Ten-spined Stickleback – and where he did several years’ research before moving to London to head the Granada TV and Film Unit at London Zoo, making films and programmes about animals. During that time he became a household name presenting *Zootime* on ITV, in competition with the BBC’s *Zoo Quest* presented by David Attenborough, a good friend. In the seventies, when he returned to England from Malta to take up the Wolfson Fellowship, he worked once more in Niko Tinbergen’s animal behaviour research group. He was elected Vice Chairman of Oxford United Football Club - which unsurprisingly led to publication of *The Soccer Tribe*, an analysis of the world of professional football.

This month [Sept] the Said Business School hosts his fourth Oxford show. It is thirtyone years since his last Oxford exhibition - although he’s had numerous shows elsewhere, and six books have been written about his paintings. One of his admirers is Richard Dawkins, who years ago bought *The Expectant Valley*, the painting that was eventually used as the book cover for *The Selfish Gene*.

Art has now been part of Desmond Morris’s life for over 50 years He works in his spacious Oxford studio amid a fantastic collection of pictures, photographs, travel mementoes and books. He has ten thousand books (and, despite a careful catalogue, sometimes buys the same one twice). Morris has found it easy to keep his own scientific curiosity alive. He is an avid internet user - “It’s the major discovery of the era” - and e-mailer, recently returning

home from a trip to find 487 messages waiting for him. He also writes a book a year. These have included detailed studies of animals and humans, as well as his memoirs and accounts of his travels, but the one he's especially proud of is an academic volume called *The Art of Ancient Cyprus* which took him several years to produce single-handedly. He did over a thousand drawings, built a darkroom and took 600 photos, designed every page, wrote every word and did a detailed analysis. Every object shown in the book was in his own huge collection at the time, though he subsequently sold the lot. He's still got a long list of books he's planning. "A lot of the books I want to write are purely for me. I've been working for years on one about the origins of art – one of my major concerns is how art began, the roots of art, and why we are an artistic species."

The scientist in him makes him certain that sooner or later some cell physiologist will find out how to stop the inefficiency of cell replacement which results in ageing. "I'm sure after I'm dead somebody will," he comments ruefully. "We can then be immortal but the population problem would be enormous. As a species we are already doubling our life span. Since I wrote *The Naked Ape* the number of people on earth has doubled. So if we can solve the problem of ageing, heaven help us! In 300 years' time, you'll have to have a breeding licence."

One of his favourite memories is of shaking hands with 121 year old Jeanne Calment who had once handed Van Gogh his tubes of paint in Arles. Calment lived till she was 122, the world's oldest person. If Desmond Morris's predictions come true sooner than he expects, he may be playfully painting at an even older age.