

Graduation 2007

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate James Dodds

Fellow students, Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen. I address you in that order because I realised today how hard you, today's graduates, have worked for your degrees. And it is a great honour for me to share this day with you in this wonderful new hall. Another very fine building, which has already been mentioned, is Firstsite's new building in Colchester, which is going to be an international arts facility. I think these new buildings are a wonderful act of faith and what a treat it will be to see the University's Latin American Collection in Colchester. Wouldn't it be great if the old Firstsite building at the Minories could display a permanent collection of East Anglian artists? However, it is now twenty years since my last graduation and thirty years since I finished my apprenticeship as a Shipwright. After graduating from the Royal College of Art, I spent many years trying to reconcile these two disciplines, worrying about whether it was better to be an artist or a boat builder. As already mentioned, the 'Blue Boat' was a very important painting for me and it reconciled these two parts of me. It was first displayed here and as already mentioned went on tour and from that a whole new body of work developed. It's a painting of a life-sized wooden clinker boat, the type I used to build and it connected directly to the heart of me. The boat was everyday and universal; an archetype that embodied everything. So, my advice to you is however contradictory your experiences are, throw nothing away, use your rich diversity – it is a source of inspiration – hold onto your own voice, use your own unique history, make your academic training serve your curiosity, make your achievements serve your imagination. For me, reconnecting with my roots was my way of regaining my balance and my true voice. I have always felt it important to be part of a community, part of the landscape. 'No man is an island' to quote John Donne's famous words. They are as relevant today as they ever were. Whether we like it or not, we are all in the same boat!

I have lived on the banks of the River Colne most of my life and the heritage and the communities of the river and the east coast have given me this secure foundation, my subject matter and literally, my point of view. So I would like to take this opportunity to thank and acknowledge all these places, boats, and people that I hold dear, particularly my wife Catherine whose love and friendship have made all this possible.

So it is with great delight that I accept this honour, a pat on the back from this Colne-side University which I now also feel part of.

Thank you.