

THE DISCERNER

Discerning The World of Arts

**Interview with Welsh contemporary landscape
artist Sarah Jane Brown**





How did you get into painting, and what has inspired you along the way?

Before becoming a full time painter I spent most of my working life at sea. As a teenager I crewed on a yacht from Pembrokeshire to Spain, then worked on local boat trips around the Pembrokeshire coast. I also worked for 10 years on the ferry to Ireland. The sea is part of who I am now and because I'm so familiar with the elements and the feeling of being at sea, it inevitably shows up as a sense of atmosphere and movement in my paintings.

I started painting after experiencing a really debilitating period of depression in my mid-30s. To help with recovery, I attended evening art classes at Pembrokeshire College, and loved it so much that I went on to a Foundation course in Art & Design and then a Fine Art Painting degree at West Wales School of the Arts. After my first successful sell-out show as a student, I launched into painting full-time and haven't looked back since!

How long have you lived in Pembrokeshire, and what does the area mean to you?

Pembrokeshire has been my home since I was a teenager. Most of my extended family lives here as well as my husband's family, including our grandchildren; it's wonderful watching them grow up here. Pembrokeshire is definitely where my heart is; I am totally in love with it. When I travel I compare the places I visit to home and Pembrokeshire always wins! It is truly a special place.

What do you find inspiring about the Pembrokeshire landscape?

The Pembrokeshire coast is 'under my skin'. It pervades every painting I make. There is something about being immersed in the vastness of the landscape that gives clarity and focus to the space within. The rugged coastal landscape around St. Davids provides endless material for this; meditative space and light, magical junctures of land, sea and sky, endlessly changing colours, reflections and atmospheric conditions, and most importantly, the feelings that are often unleashed by the experience. For me these qualities are also a metaphor to convey the internal aspects of our emotional and spiritual selves.

Is there any particular part of Pembrokeshire that inspires you to paint?

I live in St. Davids so inevitably it is the surrounding area that inspires me to paint the most because I know it so well, but also because it is so stunningly beautiful, rugged and remote. I walk the coast path or the beach almost every day, sometimes I sketch or photograph something that catches my eye, but always I am observing and taking mental notes. I also occasionally help out as crew on boat trips around Ramsey

Island and that always inspires me to try and capture the movement and power of the sea and the unique atmospheric qualities of this coast.

I particularly love walking on Whitesands beach in the winter when it is quiet. The stormy winter skies are full of colour and drama and are reflected in the wet sand. It's a subject that I love to paint over and over.

What is it that draws you to painting this landscape?

Walking every day in this dramatic environment with its rocky shores, high cliffs, big skies and unpredictable seas, can be a truly humbling experience. It reminds me how nature can be both diminishing, showing you how small you are in such a vast landscape, whilst also uplifting and transformative. One of the things that I try to convey through my paintings is the sense of motion and awe, the traditional sense of the sublime; of it being beautiful but also overwhelming.

The coastal landscape also reminds me of the important things in life. Connecting with the space of being out in the landscape allows you to gain perspective; to be more aware of everything around you, to look both inward and outward whilst being in the present moment. You can walk out onto St David's Head, a remote protected landscape, and know that a thousand years ago it wasn't any different. I feel less caught up with insignificant stuff; it's much more about what's important, what's fundamental.

What techniques do you use to create your work?

To start with I walk, photograph, sketch and make painted studies. Although I tend not to work from these directly, they allow me to embed the landscape into my 'mind's eye'. Back in the studio I combine traditional techniques with a more contemporary working practice using a variety of methods; staining, glazing and blending in many layers, gradually building up thickness and texture. Paint is applied with brushes, knives, rags and sometimes fingers. It is painted, scraped, flicked, splattered and poured on in a very intuitive decision making process.

I enjoy the versatility of oil paint, and find it the best medium to convey the varied sensations of being in the landscape; sometimes calm, restorative, or spiritually uplifting and at other times wild, dynamic, rejuvenating and mentally energising. Oil paint is also equally responsive to my internal thoughts and feelings.

What is it that compels you to paint?

Painting is my way of expressing myself, my emotions, my thoughts and feelings. It's, if you like, a visual form of poetry. Our surroundings shape our perception, and colour our thoughts and ideals, and for me are a vehicle to describe more internal aspects of our physical, emotional and spiritual selves. Emotion is what drives me to paint because it is such a human thing. I'm trying to communicate something, and I want it to be meaningful to the person that views it.

What themes or ideas have you explored recently within your paintings?

I started thinking about the way I use memory in my practise. Walking, observing and absorbing the landscape is key to my process, and photographs, drawings, and painted studies help to embed those observations. Once back in the studio I put the preparatory work aside and then paint from my personal recollections of the coast. My latest work explores the intense yet fleeting nature of these memories and their effect upon my experience of the present.

Forgetting the everyday, letting everything go and just absorbing the moment allows memories to come, ephemerally, like the sea washing in and out and leaving marks on the landscape. The details don't matter, what matters is the feeling; the sound of the sea, the gulls, the wind, the smell of the salt in the air, the feel of the elements on your skin, and the thoughts that pass through your head when you're alone on a beach or a cliff top.

I'm primarily interested in the emotions that these sensations often stir, so my paintings are really an outpouring of personal feeling coupled with a strong sense of place. The landscape becomes a metaphorical vehicle to describe more emotional concerns.

What has been the highlight of your artistic career so far?

There have been a few! Getting selected three times for the Royal Society of Marine Artists Exhibition in the Mall Galleries in central London, and also for the Cork Street Open, and I've been interviewed a few times for Radio & TV which is always very exciting.

Last year I gained representation from a good London Gallery, which was a big achievement, and I was selected for the Royal Cambrian Academy Open Exhibition in Conwy.

This year I got the opportunity to exhibit my paintings internationally at the Barcelona Artbaho Art Fair with the Art Nou Millenni Gallery, and will also be exhibiting at the Museum Gustavo de Maetzu in Navarra, Northern Spain in the New Year.

Do you have any personal goals or dreams that you would like to achieve as an artist?

I have lots of goals that I'm always working hard towards. I currently exhibit in London, Cardiff and Barcelona, and would now love to be represented by more well-established reputable galleries in different locations, and do more international exhibitions. I also aspire to membership of various prestigious art societies such as the Royal Society of Marine Artists.

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