



Panning for GOLD

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH



ABOVE
'Shapes of the Sea'



Artist Sam Brooks lets spontaneous abstraction reveal the beauty in each of her subjects.

Painter Sam Brooks is a contemporary artist with an impressive classical training. When I interview her, she quotes French symbolist Odilon Redon: “these jumbles of strange things, in which the eye loves to chase thousands of apparitions.” The reference perfectly fits her work which, whether still life or landscape, painting or collage, offers a dazzling array of colour and shape that draws your eye across the canvas until the sense of an image settles.

Sam was awarded a First-Class Honours Degree in Fine Art from Exeter College of Art, having spent time as a student painting frescoes in Italy, and she continues to study under Robin Child, acclaimed artist, tutor, former Head of Art at Marlborough College and Founder of the Art Research Centre, whose own professor was a pupil of 20th century painter Walter Sickert, who in turn

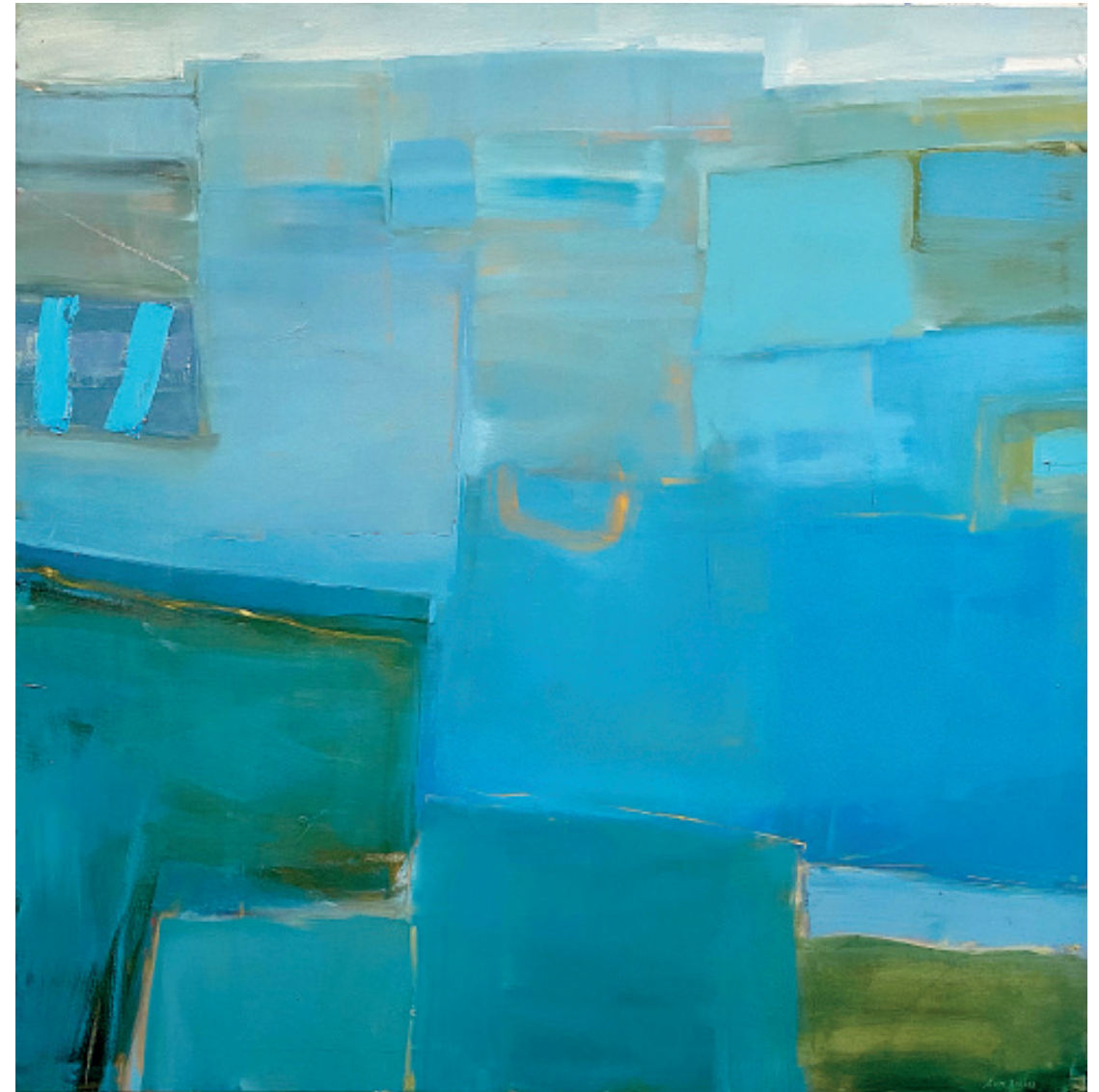
was taught by Whistler and Degas. It is an incredible lineage. “You feel you are in the presence of greatness,” she says.

This spring, Sam will exhibit her latest collection at Whitewater Contemporary in Polzeath, giving collectors the chance to engage with one of the South West’s most impressive artists. “I see my work as part of the revival in painting,” says Sam, “a continuation of the Modernist tradition which forms part of a rich history of artists, many of whom take inspiration from the South West landscape. To be a painter in the art world today is

perhaps the most radical act of all. Painting demands your full attention, you have to be fully present, you cannot look backwards or sideways. To put a simple mark on a blank canvas, and then another – well there is a lot of hope involved. It feels like a quiet, fierce rebellion of sorts.”



INSET
Sam Brooks in her studio



ABOVE
'Cerulean'



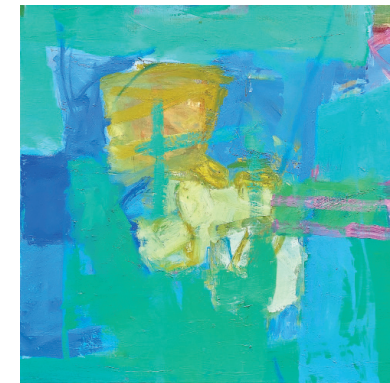
ABOVE
'Moroccan Pot'

In the tradition of early Modernism, Sam's work is, in essence, an exploration of colour, form and light. She describes her work, as a "structured yet spontaneous, fluid abstraction" and there is no doubt that her images strike a beautiful balance between subject and process. Like so many artists from the 19th century until now, Sam's inspiration comes from the challenge of moving painting beyond the figurative to a higher, more impactful plane. "I begin by making a mark," she says, "a first impulse to activate the surface. I try to follow the materiality of the paint and see what it suggests to me. I wait for the painting to tell me what it wants to be, and I try not to get in the way of that.

This pushing and pulling of something that is so fluid and porous is both exhilarating and a little terrifying, and there can be a lot of struggle involved. My paintings are explorations of the materiality of paint and finding form through serendipity. My bigger works are about the expansive and immersive qualities of landscape, while my flower works are more intimate reveries."

Influenced by her time painting frescoes in Italy, she uses pure and vivid mineral pigments in her painting: "I am obsessed with colour," she explains. "During my time at Exeter Art College, I was fortunate to travel to Italy and work with students from Venice and California on a couple of frescoes. Working with pure pigments there was an absolute joy and torment," she

says, "as some of the pigments are toxic, plus the lime you mix to press the pigment into can burn your skin, so we had to be very careful."



These days she finds pigments along the coastline near her Devon home, and then prepares them back at her studio. "We are very lucky in Devon that the

most beautiful colours form parts of the landscape," she says. "One particularly soft, orangey-pink pigment can be found along the coast at South Milton, close to my home, which I grind with an old pestle and mortar and mix with linseed oil. There is this wonderful materiality to working with oil, it is sensuous, responsive and allows for delicate glazes and veils of colour, as well as

INSET
'Sea Green'



rich, thick impasto. There is so much history to oil and so much potential – you feel like you are holding a world on the end of your brush. I give a lot of time to the consideration of colour, carefully judging its weight, value and translucency, balanced against my feeling for opacities. All these decisions enrich my compositions.”

The strandline can also be a source of subject matter, as well as pigments, on her beach-combing trips. “Little finds that I bring back to the studio, small remnants of pattern – scraps of rope, cloth, sea-glass, or the tiny worn-out edge of a pot with an interesting design – they all have these glorious washed out colours and shapes that become accidental motifs in my paintings,” says Sam. The land and sky themselves, of course, are a key inspiration for her work. “I live very close to Bantham and Salcombe where you see these incredible sunsets, full of rose madder, cadmium orange and violets,” says Sam. “There is this wonderful expansive quality to living close to the open water which I try to translate on canvas by building colours gradually in a series of delicate washes. I use a variety of tools, including giant brushes, my hands and bits of rag to initiate marks and gesture. I enjoy the materiality of the paint, and how this interacts with colour and the subtle illusion or suggestion of form.”

Sam’s interest in painting floral still lifes came during lockdown: “My husband, Martin Brooks, is also an artist and member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters,” she says. “When his teaching and exhibitions were cancelled, he started painting the flowers in our garden, and suddenly our shared

studio was filled with the most wonderful colours, textures, patterns and forms. From there, the flowers had a life of their own and slowly found their way into my work, perhaps in a more peripheral way at first, but gradually becoming more present, especially in my smaller works. Flowers are the most beautiful instrument to express colour, tone, form, structure and rhythm in a painting.”

While her husband is a skilled figurative painter, Sam’s motivation has always been the special power and quality of abstraction. “There is an experience, a phenomenon called pareidolia, where you find images or shapes in random or ambiguous visual patterns. The Rorschach inkblot test is perhaps the most famous example, or cloud-bursting another. It’s a wonderful way into abstract painting, it’s a state of grace, a letting go. By embracing uncertainty, you allow for serendipity. From the marks and layers of paint, you search and find the image by pushing or editing parts of the painting out, and at the same time you bring other parts of the painting forwards. By doing this, you allow shapes or patterns to surface in the painting. I liken it to panning for gold – you can never really know what will come out of the painting, you just have to hope something may appear, and catch it before it disappears back under the surface.”

See Sam Brooks Featured Artist from 25th March to 26th April at Whitewater Contemporary, The Parade, Polzeath PL27 6SR.

 whitewatercontemporary.co.uk



ABOVE
‘Little Italian Still Life’