



THE SOUL *of the thing*

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH

An appreciation of beauty, literature, joy and loss, give Suki Wapshott's paintings a deeply poetic edge.



Photographer Credit

Artist Suki Wapshott lives in an ocean view house above the spectacular beach at Polzeath. As a painter of sensuous landscapes inspired by the beauty of Cornwall's rugged North Coast, she is highly regarded, and highly collected, by an army of devoted buyers who share her love of this unique coastal landscape. At her studio and gallery on Polzeath's beachfront Parade, Suki paints each day in the languid company of her beloved Deer Hounds, Freddie and Daisy, and pours the passion and the poetry of her life until now onto canvas. So far it has been an extraordinary, sometimes bitterly painful life, as suggested in the following diary entry, written by Suki in 1997 when she was a newly enrolled mature student of English Literature at Oxford University.

"Oxford today, to pick up some books and go to the Bodleian - and I will probably try and find a couple of things for Niki in TK Max on the way home. Now I have overcome my fear of the library system, and more importantly the librarians, I love both the Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian. I feel privileged to have access to these institutions and to work in quiet, reverential hush - not silence, just quiet scratching, pages turning, small sighs and the gentle tapping of laptop keyboards. From the top floor of the Bodleian you can look out over the rooftops, and in the evening light Oxford becomes even more magical.

The area that English students use in the Radcliffe Camera [...] has become a sanctuary of dim lights and personal space [for me]. Tomorrow, I am to take Niki for her first prison visit."

These private notes reveal the two things from which Suki draws meaning and motivation as an artist: her love of English literature, and the precious but all-too-short life of her daughter Niki. When Suki wrote this diary entry, Niki was 18 years old and in the grip of a drug addiction that took her life only two years later. The prison visit, to see Niki's partner - who was himself a victim of drug addiction - is an example of the unfathomable split that occurred in Suki's life at that time, between the happiness and stability of their home and Suki's success in securing a place at Oxford, and her daughter's irretrievable slide into an entirely different world. "My whole life, until I came to Cornwall, has been a dichotomy" she tells me now. "It has been a life of contrasting situations, and being at Oxford was no different. Being there was new and exhilarating, but whilst I was studying in those 'hallowed halls' there was a sense of removal from the world, an unreality almost, which was brought sharply back to 'terra firma' by the challenges of being a parent at that time. I think those extremes have since emerged in the content and style of my work. Writing and painting about the more painful

TOP (left to right)
Golden Days | Earth colours - Port
Quin | Siennas and Ochres

LEFT
Suki with her hounds Daisy and Freddie



moments in my life have been cathartic and have produced some vibrant and deeply personal paintings." When Niki died, shortly after Suki's graduation, she and her husband began searching for ways to move forward, and perhaps for a way back to the happy times they had shared before. "When Niki died my life changed irrevocably" says Suki. "Some of my dearest memories of her are from holidays in Cornwall, and in addition my husband is a surfer and landscape photographer so the decision was made to sell our house and move to Polzeath.

Now I spend my days listening to the cries of gulls, and the orchestra of the sea, and feeling the sand and rocks beneath my bare feet. So many times here, when I am alone, I hear the wonderful opening stanza to John Masefield's poem Sea Fever: 'I must go down to the seas again, the lonely



sea and the sky; and all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by; And the wheel's kick and wind's song and the white sail's shaking; And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking'. Those words speak to me of the Cornwall I know" she adds, "and they speak to me very specifically of Polzeath." In the language of someone well versed in poetic expression, Suki is speaking, of course, of the dazzling appreciation of beauty, and of our very existence, that sometimes follows the pain of profound loss. Her love of landscape, and of poetry in particular, have sustained her in every aspect of her life, and Masefield's

'wind's song' and 'the grey dawn breaking' are evident in many of her paintings. "Literature has helped me evolve into the landscape painter I am" says Suki. "Most importantly, my study of Medieval and Anglo-Saxon poetry at Oxford put into my imagination an explosion of colour and form which had not previously been there." Troilus and Cresseide, she explains, was the first literary work which inspired an oil painting. "I was so struck by the solitariness of Cresseide at the beginning of Chaucer's

poem" says Suki, "and a painting I titled Criseyde at the Temple came into my head in minutes. That painting sold right off the easel and that was the start of things. Since I graduated, it has become clear to me that not just poems, but the differing processes of poetry writing over the centuries have influenced the way I think about

my art. Cornwall's landscape, of course, inspires my painting, but poetic concepts such as 'inscape' and 'instress', which Gerard Manley Hopkins termed as 'the unification of the characteristics of each thing or place', have helped me to consider what I see in the world. It is the unification of light, colour, sound, movement, tide, wind, sunlight or rain upon the sea which I attempt to bring to the canvas. It is the soul of the thing - the sand between my toes and the salt on my tongue - that I hope to convey through my work, not just the beauty of the scenery." Being in the landscape, however, and carrying with her



an internal library of her favourite poetry is a daily habit essential to her work on canvas. "In winter I spend my time walking the dogs on the beaches, and in summer I walk inland, listening to skylarks and watching kestrels and desperately trying to recall every line of Hopkins' The Windhover. Walking with the dogs is my time to think about what I am making in the studio, and I take sights and sounds back with me in my head - the wind on the strand line, or light effects on water, a budding blackberry blossom, wild flowers or pebbles on the beach. I am a great believer in daydreaming, in staring into the middle distance with no focus and letting my mind sift through things I might not notice initially. [Poet] John Keats talked of 'negative capability', where the mind is in a state of receptive passivity. It's a process that

intensifies the emotion of 'place', and the peace and beauty of this 'place' is very much what my work is about." Do painting and poetry, I ask her, inspire her in different ways, or does she see them as parallel and equally important inspirations in her life. "Poetry has always inspired me" she says thoughtfully, "and the role painting has played in my life has been varied. It has been and still is therapeutic. The influence of my own emotions and life experience, and of poetic form are all subsumed into my landscapes, and art that sings to me - the art of Da Vinci and Durer, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Turner, Renoir, Braques and Picasso - are all essential to my creativity and inspire me to pursue excellence in my own work."



ABOVE
Storm Gatherer

INSET
Mother of Pearl