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Stealing THE SHOW

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH

In the last year, Cornish painter Luke Knight has gone from relative unknown, to winner of Europe's prestigious Barcelona International Gallery Awards. We meet him at his Truro studio.

From hundreds of submissions, and just 30 works shortlisted for exhibition in Spain last autumn, Luke Knight's Cornish landscape painting 'Wish You Were Here' scooped the competition's substantial first prize, which includes European gallery representation and a coveted summer 2020 solo exhibition at CAGE Gallery, Barcelona. Were Luke an established name on the European art scene, this would be impressive, but as a totally new name in contemporary art, it hints at a talent altogether more special.

Luke, tell us how you came to be a painter.

As a child I used to paint a lot, and I later went on to study at Cardiff School of Art and Design. That's where I started to develop a real passion, not just for oil painting, but for the paintings of Europe's great masters. My degree included a four-month Erasmus Exchange at L'Ecole De Beaux-Art in France, and as well as developing my studio practice,

that opportunity allowed me to travel round Europe and see historic paintings first-hand. I spent time in Italy, Paris, and Holland at Den Bosch, the Hague and Amsterdam. I spent time in the Rijksmuseum, marvelling at Rembrandt's mastery of paint, at his ability to create illusion with such simplicity. I was able to see Titian's Venus of Urbino at the Uffizzi Gallery in Florence, and then a few days later compare it to Manet's Olympia at the Musee d'Orsay in Paris. Studying in Europe was such an enriching experience - so different but so complimentary to my experience of studying in the UK. I loved being able to just get on a train and go and see paintings I had only ever read about in books. What stayed in my memory more than anything else were paintings that had the quality of quietness, of a captured moment in time - a cinematic feel perhaps, that had something to do with composition and quality of light. Those are the works that have influenced my painting ever since.

LEFT

Luke Knight at his Truro studio



What inspired you to enter your painting for a European art prize?

I first entered a European art competition while I was studying in Cardiff. I took part in the Hanz-Brinker Painting Prize in Amsterdam, which is the largest student Fine Art prize in Europe, and I was shortlisted but didn't win. It was a great experience of course, and a chance to meet lots of other young painters. When I came across the Barcelona International Gallery Awards

it looked equally inspiring, but I didn't think past entering really. I went ahead and packed up the painting and sent it to Spain, worrying and hoping that the work would arrive safely, and was very excited to find that I was one of 30 artists shortlisted for exhibition. Actually winning the prize was



totally unexpected. Being able to show my painting to any audience feels like a privilege, so the thought that there is such a high-profile place for my work in Europe, or elsewhere for that matter, is so exciting. It is thrilling to think that contemporary work made here in Cornwall, inspired by the landscape of Cornwall, has an appreciative audience on the international art scene.

What most inspires your work?

Landscape is my inspiration, specifically

Cornwall - the sea, and the coast, and my experiences of being in these places - but as with all artworks my relationship with a painting may be different to that of the viewer's. Exhibiting a work completes the creative process in a way, because viewers develop their own relationship with a work of art. Shown in a context outside Cornwall, my paintings could be of anywhere, but what is important is that they convey the feeling, and emotion,

and experience of a place, of its 'psychogeography'. That, perhaps, is why my painting travelled so successfully. For me though, my work is about being in Cornwall. My paintings are a memory of the feeling of a particular time and place. A huge part of living in Cornwall, for me, is being able to spend time surfing

and swimming in the sea. That's where a large part of my inspiration comes from, and what necessitates my use of memory in the studio, because it is difficult to carry a sketch book into the ocean. Cornwall is such a rugged place, and much of its beauty derives from its ruggedness, from its eroded cliffs and windswept beaches. The sea plays a huge part in Cornwall's beauty, and in nearly all my paintings there is an element of water. Time in the sea is time when I can be in the moment and experience things in a different way -



ABOVE
Paddle Out Summer



ABOVE
Rain in July Blue Sky



TOP
Dream Big Sky

LEFT
Last Night

RIGHT
Last Summer

experience the feel of the ocean, the wind, and the sunlight diffused through cloud or sea spray. I hope to express the beauty of space, and emotion and light. That's what drives my work.

Tell us about your studio practice and the artists that have influenced you.

My paintings take time - sometimes months, if not years in the studio, to reach the point where I consider them finished. I work in layers, and I want my oil paint to saturate the board before I sand the surface and strip it back to discover what's underneath. I create texture by distressing the surface, by adding scrapes or cuts. I want my paintings to be polished and eroded by process, like the

landscape here, to find marks that add tension, that rip-up the surface. My paintings often have to sit, to be looked at, before the process of adding and subtracting goes on. Some paintings are started in the winter and might be finished in the summer, or vice versa. I might be struggling with a work during the day, then be in the sea that evening and experience something about the light that I want to capture. I will hold it in my memory, and when I come back to the studio it can often be the

last piece of the puzzle that brings a painting together. Many great painters have influenced my work, in particular [Pierre] Bonnard, who also painted from memory, and used colour - and changes in the temperature of a colour - to describe space. I have been looking at works by Julius Olsson lately, at his nocturne paintings of the sea, the moon and clouds, and Fred Cuming RA is a contemporary artist I look at a lot. His paintings are of seascapes and light



through clouds, and there is a space and simplicity to his paintings that I really admire. Space and simplicity in my work is what I aspire to. Alison Bevan [Director of the Royal West of England Academy] said recently about my "delicious little paintings communicate with deceptive

simplicity - the kind that masks painstaking sophistication - all that is wonderful about the Cornish landscape". That's really the very best compliment I could wish for.

See Luke Knight's work on show from 1st to 29th April at Whitewater Gallery, The Parade, Polzeath, PL27 6SR, whitewatergallery.co.uk and see lukeknightpaintings.com

 lukeknightpaintings.com

ABOVE
Wish You Were Here