



COLOURFUL CHARACTER

Kirsty Wither's gorgeous impasto paintings make for bold visual statements, yet under the bright red hair lies a very sensitive and imaginative artist at work

WORDS: STEVE PILL PHOTOGRAPHY: EMMA WARD



With her shock of scarlet hair, expressive artwork and Celtic roots, Kirsty Wither seems every bit the stereotypical feisty Scottish artist. However, while the Brighton-based painter clearly thrives on bold colours and energetic mark making where her paintings are concerned, she is more self-effacing away from her easel. Having recently held a fifth successful solo exhibition at the Portland Gallery in London's West End, she says that instead of being able to enjoy seeing her work hanging on the walls, she often simply feels sick with nerves. "I think suddenly seeing it out of your studio [means that] you have to let it go. It has to work on its own, without you there to explain it. I think that's where I have my moment of confidence crisis – rather than in the studio, where I think it's all crap anyway."

In truth, one look at her vibrant paintings should be enough to lift the spirits of even the heaviest heart. Whether she is painting rolling fields or a blooming vase of flowers, the paint is applied with real relish, in warm and appealing colour combinations. Nevertheless, the layering of oils can have its down side for her. "I often trash paintings if I have overworked them, when the sensible option would be to walk away. Knowing when to stop is important – that comes with experience."

"I often trash overworked paintings... Knowing when to stop is important"

Kirsty's artistic experience began as a child, inspired by her mother who was a ceramic artist and a creative presence in the Wither household. "She was self-taught and has always been making things for years and years. We were always very creative at home. She was really good at drawing – so we did a lot of that – and I think she made all of our clothes too, much to our embarrassment."

After spending most of her free periods at school in the art department, taking a foundation course at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen seemed a natural move for Kirsty. She revelled in the structure provided by a strict timetable, early starts and plenty of projects in various media. Her first experiment with oils proved a revelation. "I'd never really used them before," she admits. "They were wonderful, all the smells and the texture. I loved everything about them – the intensity of the colour, the way you could work with them for days – all of that was amazing. So I never looked back."

With the foundation course finished, she returned to the caravan park that her parents owned in Galloway. In between helping out around the site, Kirsty set up a >

ABOVE *Rumpus*, oil on canvas, 76x102cm

OPPOSITE PAGE Kirsty at the easel in her Brighton studio



studio in one of the outbuildings and began to produce her own oil paintings, at that time mainly figurative work and landscapes. She began exhibiting her work in the foyers of hotels in the area, presenting the pieces with the help of a local framer and selling them at just £30 or £40. “I don’t know what made me decide to do that, but I think I just wanted to try and sell some work, if it was at all possible. I had to find out if anyone wanted them. Because I think friends of friends can ask you to paint their kid or their dog, but it’s an entirely different thing to try and sell your own work.”

Her confidence grew, so much so that she was prepared to take a huge financial risk and stage her own solo show. In order to do so, she hired a conference room at the Turnberry golf resort on the outer firth of the Clyde, spending £500 of her own money to use it for just a single day. The paintings were hung in the daytime, with the private view in the evening.

The gamble paid off, with enough paintings sold to cover her costs and an impressed Glasgow gallery owner keen to sign her up. “I still am quite driven in that way. I think if you are going to do something like that, you have to give it your all. And if it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work – at least you’ve tried as hard as you can. You’ve given it 100%. If you don’t, then what’s the point?”

Over the next few years, that drive saw her establish herself via a series of solo exhibitions with galleries in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London. She eventually moved south of the border a decade ago, when her husband’s acting career necessitated a move closer to casting in London. The compensation for leaving her home and >

“Working without references means I create far more exciting paintings”



THIS PAGE *Little Riches*, oil on canvas, 31x25cm
 OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP *To the Top*, oil on canvas, 31x25cm; Kirsty's palette piled high with oils; *Head Over Heels*, oil on canvas, 46x61cm

RIGHT *Close Companions*, oil on canvas, 51x51cm



ARTIST'S BIO



Name

Kirsty Wither

Born

1968, Tidworth

Training

Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen

Next Exhibition

New Work, Mansfield Park Gallery, Glasgow, 30 April – 28 May

More Info

www.kirstywither.com

family was a life by the sea and a studio in Kempton. “It’s part of an old mews, so there are other wee businesses about – a knitwear designer and a man who does your ironing. It’s a nice little community of people.”

In truth, her move was easier as location is not important to her artwork. Despite people often claiming to recognise the areas shown in her landscapes, these and her floral paintings are borne entirely of her imagination. “I find working from the studio without any reference materials means I create far more exciting pieces,” she says. “You are not tied down to any specific things – it doesn’t have to be a blue sea or a green field, it doesn’t have to be that shape or even be over here. You can really play around with the composition this way.”

With such apparent freedom then, why does she still choose to paint flowers or landscapes at all? “I don’t know!” she laughs. “I think they’re an anchor, a starting point. There is a real attraction to really leaping off into abstract painting. Parts of all my paintings are about that. Parts of the background are more about texture and colour and shape, than about being a vase or being a table or something specific.”

Instead, Kirsty absorbs inspiration in her everyday life and then uses her paintings as a means of making an

emotional response. “If I’m thinking about a poppy,” she says as an example, “then what I am thinking about is just how brilliant they make you feel because they have massive great heads and great big red petals. They are just in-your-face flowers. I think that’s what I like about flowers: they’ve all got their own personality.”

This love of a big personality is apparent in her admiration for the work of the late Scottish painter, Joan Eardley. “She was completely mad,” Kirsty reasons. “She used to set up her canvases on a cliff and look at the roaring sea and paint it. I’m not going to go and tie myself to a telegraph pole on the top of a hill like she did.”

Instead, Kirsty’s own ambitions are far more modest. “I’d just like to paint for as long as I can paint. I’d like to be Mary Fedden. She’s 95, I think. She’s been painting every day and I think that is just a fantastic achievement.”

What does Kirsty think her 95-year old self might be like? “I’d like to think I would still be making colourful paintings. It doesn’t matter how you are feeling in yourself: once the painting has left your studio and is standing on its own two feet, my main ambition for that painting is that it makes people feel good – that people can look at it every day and it will make them feel better. When I’m 95, I hope my paintings can still do that.” 