

ART OF D'ARTMOOR

D'Art Gallery have an exclusive interview with local artist Stewart Edmondson based in Dartmoor in preparation for his exhibition conveying his love of the Devon countryside through mixed media with watercolour, acrylic and ink

When and why did you decide to paint?

As a child I had two ambitions: to be a painter and to play for Leeds United. The Leeds' scouts did come to see me play but it was short lived! But as far as art as a career was concerned I had no idea what that could mean. There were early influences: my father was in the printing trade so there were always large sheets of paper and drawing materials around the house. This was great as I didn't have to think about keeping my drawings small! The other factor was an early interest in biology so, combining the two, I ended up with a career as a Landscape Architect, a 'proper job'.

Painting evolved from doing visuals for designs and that's partly how my technique as an artist developed. I attained a 1st Class Honours degree and was sought out by the top design firms in the country. While this modest success was gratifying there was always a sense in which it wasn't enough.

Another key influence I think is the love of the outdoors which came from my parents: both were keen ramblers, and my dad was a fell runner with a deep love of the Yorkshire Dales. It was inevitable I suppose that something of this would be inherited and it certainly informs my work now.

I undertook a pre-Fine Art Course in Leeds and the experience completely put me off the idea of Art College. During the course of my 'A' levels my parents came to realize that I was really serious about art, and they had come across a fantastic Scottish painter living locally. They arranged for private lessons with him, which was the turning point for me: my experience of art at school wasn't taking me anywhere.

I had an ordinary life and at that time there was a commonly held belief that it was impossible to make a real living as a full-time artist. Later, I became friendly with a gallery owner who was also a painter. His name was Harry Beadnell and it was this relationship that finally produced the 'spark' which ignited my future career.

It meant a great deal that my father saw the



Above (clockwise from top left): Leaves fall, land sings; Dart in spate; Goodbye Mr Rain; Horn's Cross near Hangman's Point



Above top: Stewart painting on Holne Moor, Dartmoor
Above bottom: Stewart painting riverside, The Dart

commencement of my painting career just before he died last year. He came to my first show at the D'Art Gallery and really appreciated that I had gradually found my way into what I really wanted to do. Considering how competitive the art world is and how hard it is to get shows under way and sell work I am amazed by how well it is going.

At what point did you decide to approach galleries?

I gave up Landscape Architecture after not too long and became involved with the Urban Wildlife group in Birmingham. Eventually I started teaching kids about the natural world, which I continued doing for many years. Finally, I ended up in Devon with my partner Be, creating sculptural environmental play spaces for children and subsequently helping to make some of the gardens at the Eden Project. The scope and scale of all our projects was continuously widening.

I felt I had to make some decisions about painting. With Be, I went off to Cornwall in our van and we painted every day. It all grew from that. We started going out along the Dart painting every week, and then when my son Luis was born we needed some way of earning money.

If I was going to make a go of painting I knew that I had to eke out time to paint along with the day job. The birth of my son was the turning point for this. I spent a year painting two days a week, got together a selection of paintings and after a short search and some nerves, turned up at the D'Art Gallery. With so many great galleries Dartmouth seemed the epicentre of art in Devon and that was it. I have never looked back.

Do you prefer to work in the studio or outdoors?

Always outdoors. Painting outside and using as much paint as I do, it can be wild - the wind and rain tends to move it around when you throw it onto the paper. When I come back from painting I am really charged. It's not tiring at all. It can be harsh outside but I love it.

My studio is a place for just looking at the finished work, tidying it up. Big paintings tend to work out best and hardly need any changes. If I painted in the studio my paintings could be tight and overworked. It's fantastic outside for being unfettered - you're not totally in control because of the weather and the raw inspiration of the place. Pots of ink and water can get blown over the paper. Rain and spray goes all over and at first it looks chaotic but I work with it: sometimes it's ruined, sometimes it's great. I love that unpredictable aspect. If I felt I was fighting against the elements it would not be enjoyable but I just relish the chaos.

What are your favourite subjects?

At the moment, big skies, because that's what is happening out there right now. I've just got into Rothko, having

received one of his books for Christmas and it's fantastic how he gets colour to resonate. That's what I want to get into my work, creating such mood through the use of colour. The drama, the big skies and the heavy oppression of the moor. I struggle with sun - I don't do sunny! I enjoy shimmering seas and that sparkling light on water, but when the sun is shining up on the moors it's devastating to me - far too pretty! But now, (at the time of writing, winter) this time of year is fantastic.

The river valleys are what I am about. The majority of my paintings are done within a mile of where I live, I have a relationship with this area and that's why it probably works. The sense of place is really important to me.

What media do you prefer?

Oil sticks are coming in now; inks using oil stick first and then painting over the top with watercolour and acrylic and scraping through building up layers. Almost a Turner-like quality in the sky, deep rich umber brown, a storm coming or just having gone, and deep blue. You can't do that just with one wash. But using oil stick gives the heavy ground and then painting over gives a quality of vibration, a resonance. I use pencils, drawing into wet paint. Also very thick paper and cutting and scratching into it works well.

Which artists have influenced you?

Jackson Pollock and Rothko - I love the abstract expressionists. And I am influenced by wildness and colour - nature itself as artist.

Has your success changed the way you think?

I don't think about success yet. I don't feel that I've done a painting so far that I'm totally happy about. I am utterly grateful for the commercial success and it's fantastic to paint when I want - it's amazing. Being able to paint every day has increased my confidence, now that I can go out and paint when it's happening - the seasons and elements, the skies and rain.

What's next with your composition?

I want to get into a theme exploring particular places and then playing more with the raw colour vibration of the moors. Living up on the moors makes it easier - being literally surrounded by the landscape I try to paint. But being pushed to go to the sea to widen my subjects was a very positive experience for which I am thankful! I find it easy to let the paintings go, where some artists find that difficult. I feel I have only just started, and it's a great and inspiring feeling.

The exhibition starts on March 22nd 2008

For further details visit www.dart-gallery.com