

Light on the Land

Success has come suddenly to Stewart Edmondson. Like a child suddenly given spending money in a sweet shop, he can't believe his luck. He's all smiles and laughter. "As a painter," he tells me, "I'm in my infancy. Come back in five years' time when I might have something interesting to say."

Infancy or not, Stewart can only just keep up with the demand for his work, and last summer he won Art in Devon's prize at the South West Academy Show. His main subject is the Dartmoor landscape, he paints on location and his approach is dynamic.

"I tend to paint where there's something very alive, very potent," he says. "In the autumn, for example, or at the point where a river disappears round a bend with an intensity of light against night-black trees. I love the whole moor, especially on a rainy, misty day where there's a line of light just where the land meets the horizon – or where there's black against deep red bracken. I've not caught it yet."

Stewart's winning picture shows the river below his house, dark like its surrounding woods, with whitened swirls indicating its power. The words 'colour' and 'chaos' are frequently on his lips. Rain can become a component of his painting (though he erects a tiny fisherman's shelter when the weather's really rough) and "something happens to the paint which is beyond my control." He'll work to capture "great sweeps of storm powering down to earth."

He uses a watercolour base together with acrylic ink, producing a richness of colour, frequently scratching off paint with his fingernails or a sharp knife to achieve a particular tone. "I like the messy bit," he says, "when the painting has a life of its own."

Stewart's aim is to become emotionally involved with a place, allowing the resultant energy to fire his work. This may involve splattering the paint. He admires the landscape-inspired action painter, Kurt Jackson, who paints outdoors, often working on cliff tops, and Odilon Redon, the symbolist painter "whose slightly out of focus flowers demonstrate an emotional element in his work."

Stewart trained, however, not as a painter, but as a landscape architect. "I've always painted or drawn" he says, "and as a child I'd wanted to be an artist." But he was channelled into a less problematic career. For four years, he worked for the Urban Wildlife Trust in Birmingham, setting up, and finally managing, the Centre of the Earth Project, a forum for environmental education. He was eventually offered a job with Devon Wildlife Trust where he again worked in education.

This was followed by three years' travel in Central America, Mexico and, finally, Australia where he underwent the kind of life-changing

experience that you just don't want. He was hit by a truck while out walking. Recovery took a year, but since then, painting has gradually taken him over.

At first, Stewart worked at Cape Byron Headland Reserve in New South Wales, producing large acrylic paintings of wildlife for a permanent exhibition. On his return to Devon, he met his wife-to-be, and the two worked on community arts projects, creating mosaics and living-willow sculptures. They've recently collaborated in the design of a garden at the Eden Project where school children can learn about plants.

The final spur to Stewart's life as a full-time painter came with the birth of his son, Luis, in 2002. This released a flood of creativity, and by the summer of last year, he'd put together a portfolio, had two paintings in Art in Devon's exhibition at Delamore and won his prize at the South West Academy Show. His work was then accepted at the D'art Gallery in Dartmouth, and his next exhibition opens there on April 15th. He's now been commissioned to produce a series of paintings of the landscape around Haytor for the dining room at The Ilington Country House Hotel.

Particularly exciting for Stewart has been collaboration with poet, Daverick Leggatt. The two have a special rapport and have produced a slim book – *Wild Land, Burning Hearts* - in which each painting accompanies a poem. The book blazes with the men's explosive response to landscape and their apprehension of what it means to be part of earth's harshness, creativity and propensity to heal.

Stewart's father was a printer. There were always drawing materials available at home, and paintings by his great-grandfather hung on the walls. In his teens, he was encouraged by Harry Beadnell, a local painter and gallery-owner in Leeds, and, soon after moving to his current home, Stewart had what seems to have been a very prophetic dream involving Harry. He saw his old friend emerging from Holne woods, brushes in hand, and heard the man telling him to wait no longer. Now the real work has begun.