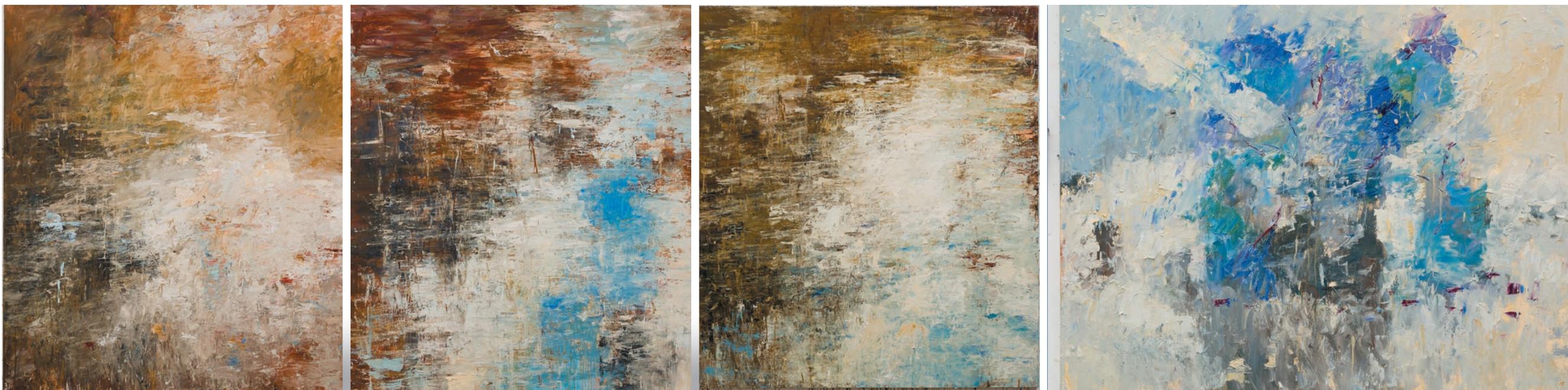


inside Aladdin's cave

JUDY BUXTON'S STUDIO PROVES
TO BE A PLACE OF MAGIC

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To be inside Judy Buxton's studio results in a curious sensation. On the walls, there are Buxton's paintings – large and enigmatic oils on canvas, hovering between abstraction and representation, positively oozing paint, authority and integrity. On the floor, there is more paint – years and years of it, encrusted in layers, a testimony to Buxton's absorption in her calling. Paint is on the ▶



surfaces, on Buxton's easel, on books, chairs, mugs and other interlopers in this tall, outsize room, itself part of a former Sunday school. Paint is everywhere.

The effect, initially, is disorientating. It's as if to visit an Aladdin's cave: a place of magic, and yet one whose sheer painterliness – perhaps, even, physicality – could as easily prove overwhelming as metamorphic.

In person, Buxton mirrors this sense of dynamism and potential. Born in Australia in 1961, she speaks gently, her accent a mix of southern English and Sydney Australian. But listen carefully, and one thing soon becomes clear: Buxton is clear-headed and resolute, a woman of conviction whose acts and words are never idle.

Witness Buxton's decision to become an artist. "I was 22, and had an office job in Knightsbridge, in London," she says. "One night, after work, I was lying in the bath, thinking about why I'd travelled halfway around the world. I asked myself, what was it that I wanted to do? Why was I doing this boring job? The answer was obvious. I wanted to be an artist. I'd always wanted to be an artist. That same evening, I enrolled in three evening classes a week and began the process of fulfilling my ambition."

Rewinding to Buxton's upbringing in Sydney is to find a busy, active child who was "always drawing and painting and making things, including my own clothes," as she puts it. Her mother Leonore was, she says, an "outsider artist"; her father John, who died when Buxton was five, served in the army and worked as a horse-racing commentator between the World Wars. And as much as Buxton was an artistic child, she was an outdoorsy one too: "I used to cycle and swim a lot, and later also went scuba diving. Each weekend we'd go to the beach, to places like Bondi, Manley and Cronulla. I tried most things, and loved horses as well."

Then, Buxton did not have her own horses; today, riding is not only part of the fabric of her life but she also breeds – and paints – horses. In fact, horses were to occupy Buxton soon after she arrived in England as a young woman.

"I'd had various odd jobs in Australia, and set off to travel around Europe with my sister Julie when I was 21. But then I managed to leave my handbag on a train, complete with my money and passport. I couldn't leave the country, and had to stay."

With her sister, Buxton travelled to Tintagel, and while there went horse-riding for the first time. Smitten, she asked the owners if she could stay and work for her keep. They agreed, and while Julie travelled on to France, Buxton later hitch-hiked to the Lake District. "I'd been given the address of a farm," she recalls. "I turned up and fortunately got some work there."

Buxton also made a trip to Scotland, where she recalls sketching in the Highlands, before she was able to return to Australia. Then, just six months later, she came back to Britain. Her epiphany in London led to immersion in life-drawing classes, painting and clay modelling, and then a move to Gloucestershire, the aim being to paint and draw as much as possible. Of this period, Buxton says: "I worked for an elderly lady as a cook. But I'd go off painting en plein air all the time; every spare moment was filled with painting. I was very spirited."

Next on her UK odyssey was Devon. "I took a job in Totnes looking after a family who'd lost their mother," says Buxton. "One of the daughters persuaded me to take my art further. In fact, she made me an appointment to talk about the foundation course at Torquay Technical College." The die was cast; Buxton enrolled on the course and then, in 1997, began a degree in fine art at Falmouth College of Art. She would

graduate three years later with a first.

By this time, Buxton had met the man who would become her husband – the artist Jeremy Annear. The couple married in the final year of the next phase of Buxton's artistic evolution, a three-year postgraduate diploma in painting at the Royal Academy in London. Both Buxton and Annear are musicians, and both are first-rate, nationally known painters, but theirs is a perhaps a relationship in which difference makes for strength: while Annear is a devout Christian, Buxton is an atheist; where Annear's work is abstract, not just in its look but its prompts, Buxton's is rooted in the landscape, emerging as something neither representational nor abstract. And of living with a fellow artist – indeed, in working next to her husband, whose studio adjoins hers – Buxton is unequivocal: "It's great being with Jeremy. We respect and admire each other's work, and can always talk about it, for example asking advice on selections for shows."

Upon completing her Royal Academy studies, Buxton and Annear moved to Australia. Fortune favoured them: "We did well there, thanks to some commissions and interior design work from the owner of a large market research company," says Buxton. So well, indeed, that Buxton and Annear were able to return to the UK in 1994 and buy the house that remains theirs to this day – a former chapel and Sunday school on The Lizard peninsula.

Buxton hit the ground running. In 1995, she was elected a member of the Newlyn Society of Artists; the same year saw her become a visiting lecturer in fine art for Falmouth College of Art. Shows and awards came quickly, as did coverage in national newspapers such as *The FT* and *Guardian*. In Cornwall, Buxton was to find her first major advocate in David Falconer, then the owner of The New Millennium Gallery in St Ives [latterly the Millennium and now, the Anima

Mundi gallery]. Many shows would follow with The New Millennium, likewise, in particular, with The Campden Gallery in Gloucestershire and Thackeray Gallery in London. Buxton's work is also to be found in a number of major collections, among them those of Falmouth College of Art, Tresco Estate, The Swiss Bank and Connaught Hotel, and in 2005 she took second place in the prestigious 25th anniversary Hunting Art Prize.

Today, Buxton's days are filled with her beloved horses and dogs, and, as ever, with her painting. Over the years she has absorbed a variety of influences, from Karl Weschke – "I loved his work when I first saw it when I was student at Falmouth, so much so that I turned up at his house to see him," she says – to Monet, other French Impressionists, Frank Auerbach and Australian painters such as John Olsen and Fred Williams. No surprise, also, that Buxton loves Aboriginal art – "its physicality is wonderful," she says – but the result of all this, with so complete an engagement with life as a painter, is something uniquely her own, something beyond influence and categorisation.

The landscape of *The Lizard* – its creeks and moors, its woods, cliffs and beaches – is the immediate inspiration, but, as Buxton puts it, "I'm trying to keep hold of the landscape, but also to let it go at the same time; it speaks as a physical presence, and yet I don't want to be too topographical. So it's something more than light and colour, weight and mass; I'm trying to make a true mark."

Falconer once wrote, of Buxton's work, that it "satisfies a fundamental primal need." He is right. And, after all, my visit to Buxton's studio is metamorphic. I feel better. Uplifted, reflective, melancholic, quietly happy; all these things, and more. It's what comes of a visit to an Aladdin's Cave, when it's the home of great art. 

*Judy Buxton is represented by The Thackeray Gallery, www.thackeraygallery.com
For more information, visit www.judybuxton.com*