

Rachel Fenner

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In the sold-out September edition of The Artist magazine, Rachel's work was profiled in their regular feature: 'In Conversation'.

The four-page in-depth interview, by Caroline Saunders, is the first Rachel has accepted in many years and gives a unique insight to her creative thought process and motivation behind some of her most iconic choices of landscape.

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IN CONVERSATION

A sense of place

Caroline Saunders talks to **Rachel Fenner** about her landscape-based abstractions, reminiscent of those of war artist Paul Nash

With an imaginative quasi-abstract style of painting, akin to the neo-romantics, Rachel Fenner draws on the physicality of the landscape. Her imagery is rooted in nature, with strong references to water and the natural and archaeological sites of ancient Britain. Rachel admires the followers of William Blake, namely Samuel Palmer, Graham Sutherland and Paul Nash, with whom she has always felt a strong affinity because of his ability to create a sense of place. 'Close observation and drawing from nature has led me to feel analogies that have

created a form of poetic sensibility,' she says. 'The process of abstraction happens by absorbing an atmosphere or place over a long period of time and drawing out or abstracting motifs from memory and reference.'

Geometric forms

Rachel has a vast repertoire of techniques and working methods. Her versatility enables modelling with a broad range of materials. 'My paintings have assimilated the language of the geometrical forms that underpinned much of my environmental sculpture.'

A. Winter Trees and Field, gouache on paper, 14x11x55 (14x20cm).
'A square format for landscape helps with the abstraction. I decided to keep the tones quite muted and marry them with a hint of pinkish warmth and reflected light. After deciding on overall layout I started painting the strong fern patterns and colours of the main focal point. I always mix colour. The colours I used were cerulean blue, yellow ochre, raw umber, lemon yellow and titanium white. I kept a lot of fluidity in painting the water and obvious hill forms by keeping the paint wet for quite a long time.'

'Rachel deliberately chooses square canvases otherwise she finds there is a tendency to produce a view incorporating land, sky and horizon'

she is now primarily inspired by the coastal landscapes of Pembrokeshire, Dorset and Cornwall and visits places frequently. 'I've been on St David's Pembrokeshire, below Porth-y-Cwm has inspired dozens of pieces. My paintings feature a prominent square rock and the large curve found on that beach. I do take photographs but I have to be selective and filter them. I file them away because I find they trip me up.'

Rachel deliberately chooses square canvases otherwise she finds there is a tendency to produce a view incorporating land, sky and horizon. She never uses the Golden Section but has spent many years exploring and developing a personal geometry, which has now evolved into a series of mathematical systems attributed to the Alexandrian Greek mathematician Euclid. 'The style is crucial to authorship and is embedded in the

ongoing development of my compositions, so a strong sense of form in my paintings is inevitable.' Drawing a grid divides the composition into fifths. 'The grid will stimulate big diagonals running across the surface. A lot of my painting is about dialogues between different parts. Shapes develop from the grid, sometimes organically. Every painting is different, great curves and diagonals may arise.'

Painting techniques

Having painted in many media, she finds acrylics too potent and intense in colour. Although she lives she finds they generally take too long to dry. Therefore a great many of her paintings are produced in gouache, which is favoured for its fluidity, viscosity of colour and the luminosity achieved from the permeating white glow of the paper. 'Gouache requires spontaneity; you have to get it right first time.

I sometimes give up if it loses its luminosity. You cannot over paint. If I want an orange, for instance, I use a thick wash. Although gouache is classified as a watercolour it's a lot

'I. Stone Steep, gouache on paper, 15x11x15 (43x38cm).
'Once the format of the picture is decided I never deviate as it usually involves divisions and sub-divisions where the geometry is important to the structure. Any underpainting in gouache was this light and fluid. Pale ochre yellow was used under the yellow ochre for the landscape. Some textures were achieved at the thick but fluid paint was applied later with a brush. Swathes, sponge, squeegee and pencil. The blowing horizon trees and the area of scrub and water were put in later. The stem over the yellow land area during the last colour to make a shape that connects across the painting.'



IN CONVERSATION



1 Winton February, Wind and Sun, gouache on paper, 11 x 17in (28 x 43cm). I did a big drawing that had fragmented marks and textures evoking the wind and weather after a cold February walk. This developed into another smaller painting in which I tried to keep the colours of dry winter grasses lit by the sudden appearance of the sun. The presence of limestone was shown in the paths, cliff edges and ledges going into the distance. I used darkened ochre to suggest the steep fynbos. The sea colour is ultramarine, cerulean and white, sometimes mixed with viridian green and a touch of cadmium red. Pencil was used to emphasise the cliffs and the geological ribs.



2 Cree Mouth with Driftwood, gouache on paper, 17 x 17in (43 x 43cm). I deliberately chose a square format to counter the tendency to produce a 'picturesque view'. The overall colour palette was kept warm with cadmium reds and yellows, and to some extent suffused the painting with warmth in the grey and pinkish areas. There was some degree of structural layout in mind but the painting developed organically with shapes growing around and within other shapes, unified by a sense of place and colour choices.

denser and is suspended in gum arabic. I have been known to mix colour in gum arabic to regulate the viscosity but it remains on the palette forever and cannot be removed. I like the paint to be able to travel under my control. The surface needs to be wet.

My work has a strong emphasis on gesture. Keeping a balance between precision and spontaneity encourages particular kinds of approaches to mark making. The textural qualities in my paintings are usually achieved by varying the thickness of the paint and the way it is applied. To make marks Rachel uses sponge, kitchen towel, brush handles and palette knives. She uses a printing/overprinting technique by using shaped formers of wood or card. Sometimes the edge of a palette knife is used to create a precise edge. A touch of charcoal or graphite is the laying-out process establishes a measurement or boundary. It also emphasises form or tone and occasionally is used right through the painting process. Rachel favours sable and Pro Arte Prolene brushes for gouache and oil, sizes 1 to 5. For oils she also uses a round and flat hog hair but likes a wide soft flat brush for moving paint around on the surface.

When using oils Rachel opts for a pre-primed canvas or plywood, primed with gesso. She sometimes finishes an oil painting by using re-touching varnish on the dark tones. Medium or thick cartridge paper, ranging from 220 to 300gsm is used for gouache, sometimes stretched on a wooden board. Recently she has been using watercolour paper, which does not need stretching, but she finds the dimples in the paper are not conducive to creating big shapes.

Strict colour range

Rachel adheres to a palette of mainly cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium red, cadmium red deep, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, burnt umber, raw umber, viridian green and titanium white. 'I never see black because it absorbs light. I can always get near enough to black using my palette. I had a great teacher who made me paint with cadmium yellow, cadmium red, cerulean blue and titanium white. It is true a whole painting can develop from only three pigments and a white. If the palette is kept clean a considerable dark tone and wide tonal range can be achieved.

'It's becoming increasingly difficult to find paints with high levels of mineral-based pigment, but these are particularly important to me because the colours are denser and more



reliable. If a thinner, longer lasting pigment is used some of the transparency is lost.' Rachel does not stick to a particular brand. 'I use Daler-Rowney and Winsor & Newton. However, I am not beyond using cheap paints, especially if there's a colour I cannot otherwise obtain – gouache is very expensive.' Although she has been painting a long time and sold a great many, Rachel has never gone back to customers to ask how the work is standing the test of time. With the knowledge that blues and greens do fade in sunlight she always advises not to hang such works near windows.

Timescale is not important, sometimes Rachel leaves pieces for years, returning to them when she realises exactly what is needed. She often thinks of paintings as a series, which can be based on stylistic consistency or an exploration of specific types of subject. Rachel says 'Art practice is part of an ongoing process of engaging with the world, without which I think I'd go a bit crazy!'

3 Storm and Coastal Felt, gouache on paper, 11 x 17in (28 x 43cm).

This was a very spontaneous painting, with elements that occur in my work. The shapes grew largely from internalised geography or sense of place and dictated one another. The curves and horizontal curves of the design are sympathetic to the stormy mood. The use has come out suddenly and dramatically as the yellows and ochres suffusing the landscape suggest. Quite a lot of ultramarine and cadmium red was used in mixing, and some viridian green and titanium white, textured areas were achieved with a flat, 2 watercolour brush and the end of a fine brush handle. Quite a bit of cerulean blue was also used in the colour mix.

Rachel Fenner

trained in sculpture and painting at Wimbledon School of Art before spending four years as a post-graduate student in the Sculpture School of the Royal College of Art, she taught sculpture at Wimbledon School of Art, West Surrey College of Art in Farnham and Winchester School of Art. Rachel has regularly exhibited her paintings in London since 1992 and her work is exhibited at Harbour Lights Gallery, St Davids, Pembrokehire, www.art2by.com, Winter Gallery, Winchester, www.wintergallery.com and Waterside Fine Art, Stratford upon Avon, www.watersidefineart.com, www.rachelfenner.co.uk.

