

AN INTERVIEW WITH CICELY CRESWELL

Cicely Creswell is a British artist, based in Surrey Hills, UK. In this interview, Cicely discusses the landscapes that shape her work, her compositions as a place for contemplation, and how her background in history and wine influences the intricate stories she tells.

CG What initially drew you to create intricate narratives using ink as your medium?

CC Ink is such a wonderful medium. It is so versatile and the velvety, heavy lines that you can achieve hold a great amount of information while remaining quite simple - it's this richness that drew me first. I particularly remember seeing the textural ink drawings by Van Gogh—they're composed of such a beautiful collection of monochrome marks, and it struck me how easily you could get lost in them. Looking back, the ink studies of master artists have always been really compelling to me. They offer information in a broad and open way, commanding interaction and imagination to complete or discover the rest.

I think the other 'draw' of the medium is how ink and paper is so much a part of human history, communication and imagination. Ink is such a foundational vehicle for the expression of ideas and storytelling, and for me to continue in that tradition is naturally compelling.

It is worth mentioning how accessible ink is too, this was a huge draw for me as I could go anywhere and take my work with me. I think this accessibility also connects with a great variety of people - anyone can understand the process. There is something very special about using a material that is really accessible and creating something beautiful with it.





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Regarding the intricacy of my work, I believe my role as an artist is to create space - each work should make space for and conduct the experience of anyone standing before it. It is the sense of getting lost in an artwork that drew me to use great detail in my own; being able to find the smallest mark and see the deliberate care taken to produce it is one of the greatest pleasures. The deliberate complexity of my work is intended to create a space of contemplation and slowness, with a sense of discovery. To get lost in a work and lost in one's thoughts at the same time, or to think about nothing at all is a triumph. One of the greatest pleasures I have as an artist is encouraging a feeling of peace and a space for thought through my work.

CG Which environment has influenced you most, in terms of the themes and landscapes in your work?

CC Living and working in the Surrey Hills is a great privilege but Cornwall, where my mother's family are, is the place that has influenced my work the most. Not only do our lives in Cornwall, family stories and Cornish folklore play a great role in the narratives of my work; but the ancient landscape where woodlands meet the sea, has offered a basis for the visual language I use. Cornwall has always been a place of magic and endless discovery, where anything could be found around any corner, be that an idea or a story or a thing. The land itself has always been a vessel for stories and discovery: from trade and connection, smuggling and war, to folk tales, and thought. It is this generosity of a landscape that has influenced my work more than anything and I have carried these ideas with me.

Of course, the Surrey Hills do have their impact. Most significant is the time I'm able to spend with my father, who has Alzheimer's disease and who I help to care for. I have been able to spend a great amount of time with him and hear his stories and thoughts, which has led to a different understanding of time and colour. When my father first became ill his (already sharp) sense of colour and light was intensified dramatically, in the sense that he soon found the lack of either greatly disturbing. This didn't impact my work at first, but after many conversations about the

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associations we have between colour and place, or colour and day, or colour and feeling, I was soon compelled to integrate these associations into my work. My work has also become much more focused on time, how we spend it and the stories we choose to document.

CG Can you share more on your background in history and wine, and how these experiences shape the narratives you explore in your art?

CC Collecting skills from every aspect of life is a great joy. My background studying history at university gave me the love of research, it taught me how to evaluate information and follow a line of interest. This has continued to be hugely beneficial to my work, keeping me critically interested and allowing me to properly explore the narratives I consider.

Having worked in the wine trade for years - studying for several different qualifications and focusing on largely on naturally produced wines - ecology and commodification became a great focus. Farming of any kind is a transaction between humans and nature and the commodities produced are social signifiers and storytellers in themselves - wine is a particularly potent and ancient one. The connection between humanity and the land has always been a core theme in my work and I think that studying and sharing wine gave me greater insight into that connection.



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Wine has also often been on the table and at the centre of many fantastic conversations that have shaped my thoughts and work, as it is for many. For better or for worse, wine has led to the creation and telling of stories since ancient times.

CG What inspired you to use flattened and distorted perspectives in your work, and how does this choice impact the stories you tell?

CC My works are landscapes, but the distorted perspectives add intrigue and make the works at once familiar and unfamiliar. The perspective is also a formal tool which helps the reading of a complicated and visually full image. This balance of the distorted familiar landscape, where buildings lead your eye one way, staircases another and ropes another again, carries you around a work. I want my works to feel as if they are full of endless things to find and many paths to follow, whether that be in the work of in the viewers own head.

The flatness of the works comes from my love of books and specifically text on a page. I think it is entirely wonderful that you can look at a linear, formally simple page of text and see only flatness, but then that flatness can become a whole world of information. In a similar vein, I want my drawings to offer a space with which to find one's own focus and, when read, build one's own worlds.

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CG Could you describe your process of creating such detailed and complex pieces? How do you approach the storytelling aspect and choice of subject matter?

CC I see where the research leads me, sometimes there is a clear story and sometimes it's a lot more subtle, more of a feeling, but I always have a subject in mind. These come from a plethora of sources: from books and films, to historical narratives, to tangible feelings or a word and phrases that just won't leave my head. I will assemble a collection of sketches that act as the visual clues to the subject I am working with, I like to work from primary sources as much as I can so spend a lot of time sketching outside. Then comes the formal composition work - do I want the work to be challenging or easily navigated? How full of visual clues does it need to be?

I will be reading and thinking about a story or subject while creating a work and will offer that up to the viewer through visual clues, but I do not approach the storytelling in a prescriptive way, and I am not expecting that narrative to be the only one received through the work. I find a great amount of peace in having the space to think about a subject that I am focused on, and creating something that requires me to spend a lot of time with those ideas. The narratives in my work are intended create this space for the viewer just as much as they are to tell stories themselves.

CG How do you decide your final compositions, are they set before beginning each piece or do you improvise using free hand?

CC Finding the final composition really depends on the piece. I do a lot of life drawing and so the body, for the most part, is the basis of the greater landscape. The composition, in a broad sense, will come from details of these life drawings - whether that be full figure drawings that have made up some of my earlier works, or more smaller and focused details. The body can provide paths and direction that make a lot of visual sense.

Using these drawings as a basis I then bring in the narrative details, working them into the land, depending on the subject I am working with the narrative positioning of the details change. I tend to have an anchor, usually a larger, more simple and eye catching detail from which your eye can travel to the other, smaller details which seem to appear as you look. As my works are so detailed, they need to be able to be read effectively, and as I intend to create a space for thought and consideration, the composition is constructed to carry the eye and aid comprehension.

I usually paint to gauge the weight of each section of a composition and how you will move around it, then, with the collections of sketches I have made during the research process, I construct a final piece.



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CG What continues to inspire the themes of connection between humanity and our ecosystem in your artwork?

CC The narrative themes in my works come from a deep interest and passion for people and the world we live in.

There are many very simple joys that inspire me, like the silliness of some plant based folktales. For example one of my works for this exhibition 'Kin' features a bright yellow centre made using ink and saffron - this is in reference to the folklore that claims consumption of too much saffron can cause 'immoderate laughter' particularly in women - it's such a wonderful claim. This piece also references Cornish folklore, where if one has seaweed in their home they will 'never lack a friend'. Small ideas like this are just as influential as bigger fields of thought - such as my piece 'Listening Garden' 2023, which references the practice of acoustic ecology and listening as a scientific practice to understand our changing world.

People and the ecosystems we inhabit are ever present inspirations and there is so much to learn, and so much to say about both - big and small..

CG Have you encountered any significant challenges in your artistic journey, and how have you managed to overcome them?

CC For several years now, I have struggled with significant repetitive strain in my hand, which is inconvenient in the extreme and has been frustrating to have to limit the work I love to do. I am, however, grateful for it in part as it has slowed me down; rather than getting stuck in production mode, I am forced to take time to sit and think - which I struggled to justify in the past. This time to think is really beneficial, approaching each work more slowly and mindfully than feels natural can be challenging but there is joy in that too. It does of course limit my production and the number of works I produce is forced to be limited. Each is an individual nurturing.

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CG You recently won the Edinburgh Printmakers Residency Award at the Royal Scottish Academy. Is there a specific goal you hope to achieve in the near future on your creative journey?

CC The Edinburgh Printmakers Residency is a wonderful opportunity to work in and with an amazing studio and community. It is not so much a goal, but I am endlessly looking forward to work amongst such a team as the one at EP. My work requires a lot of time and focus and, as much of the rest of my time is spent with family, it is rare that I am able to work in such a manner with other artists - I hope to really nurture what that offers me. Not to mention the expansion of my medium and the opportunity to explore and push the limits I currently work towards - I have some exciting plans for this.

My work relies on the connections I make with people and places, oftentimes that is sharing in the lives of others and the stories they tell. It is not so much a list of goals but rather a continuing exploration, expansion and maturing of my work and continually improving my ability to communicate and create space for these valuable ideas of storytelling, time and thought.

I believe that tools for stillness, thought and connection are the most valuable things we have. To tell and to listen to stories and most importantly to find space in our minds to really consider them, is a really powerful way to lead to action and true, radical change. If my work can provide a space for anyone to really consider something and to have a conversation, whether that be with the narrative I chose to share or not, that allows for any kind of change of thought, then that is the most valuable thing I can do. Space for stillness and thought can lead to the most essential and valuable change.



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