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AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA COOPER

Jessica Cooper is a painter who is based in Cornwall, UK. Here she shares the inspirations of her early life, insights into her creative process, and finding meaning in the everyday.

CG Can you tell us about your early influences and what led you to pursue art and textiles?

JC Where I was brought up is the defining and constant influence upon my work - in a small hamlet on the north coast of West Penwith in Cornwall. As a child, other than playing outside, on the beach, in the garden or the surrounding moorland and fields, the only things available to do were to read, sew or to draw. I remember, on rainy days, the kitchen table being covered with coloured pens, pencils and paper, button boxes and fabric and I would spend hours lost in my imagination and making things.

CG Your work often explores domestic subjects, including interiors, still life, and landscapes. How would you describe your artistic approach, and what draws you to these themes consistently?

JC The house that I grew up in had two huge plate glass windows in the upstairs living room with wide ledges that you could sit on - they remind me now of two framed paintings. I spent hours sitting, looking out at the wild moors on one side and the Atlantic sea on the other, curled up on those window sills, trying not to knock over the ceramics and artefacts that decorated them.



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Being brought up “in the middle of nowhere”, the awareness of and the sense of space has always been ingrained in my work. That space - the blankness of a canvas - allows an object the breathing space to sit within it; the ‘view’ of an isolated house or a fruit bowl on a wide window ledge. The uncluttered-ness of this ‘view’ allowed any object to stand out, which subconsciously informed me about the significance of the single line.

CG Your work features intentional line making using acrylic and pen on canvas. Why do you find this medium best for your artistic expression?

JC As a young artist I felt I did not consider myself a ‘proper artist’ unless I worked in oils - I struggled for a few years trying to prove something by using them. The building up of layers and then the partial distressing of them has always been a part of my process. I would distress layers of oil with thinners consequently fumigating the studio out, until I reached a point where I felt I had to find an easier and safer way in which to work, leading me to try acrylics. The use of acrylics totally opened up my way of working, this medium allows me to methodically build up layers or to make spontaneous and clean marks.



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CG Can you walk us through your creative process, from the initial idea to the finished piece, and how you balance planning with spontaneity?

JC I usually begin from one of three places: a sketchbook, a photograph and film, or a locked memory.

I use the sketchbooks for consolidating ideas (if working on a particular project or towards an exhibition), for writing notes and for drawing - using black pen, outlined drawings, and sometimes introducing colour. I use my phone to take photographs and to make short and spontaneous film clips, if something catches my attention in passing and I don't have time to draw. I use my memory, similar to a camera - if I notice something and I can't stop, I lock that image away in my brain until I can use it or it is forgotten.

Utilising all 3 of these processes allows me to find a starting point, a way into the paintings. I can sit and look through the sketchbooks, slowly sourcing the subject matter for the work. I use the films and photographs to remind me of a feeling and to evoke emotions. And, I use the ‘locked’ memory to work in a very immediate and spontaneous way.

Of course, the individual painting, will always take on a life of its own.

CG Your titles, such as ‘Butterfly Blue Pincushion Flowers’ and ‘All of My Friends at Once,’ seem to carry a narrative. How do you choose titles for your pieces, and what role do they play in the interpretation of your work?

JC Visually, paintings always carry their own narrative, and I enjoy that each of us will have a unique interpretation of a piece of work. On the other hand, the titles of my paintings have always been important to me: I use them in different ways to give the viewer a slight insight into my meaning behind the work, without being too explicit. The titles often have a humour, a darkness or a love embedded within them - taking their sources from lyrics, books, politics and how I may be feeling or what I have experienced on that actual day.

CG What are your main inspirations, both from everyday life, and from other artists, places, or experiences? With reference to your style, subject matter, and choice of medium.

JC I usually find inspiration in the ordinary, overlooked and the unexpected - the colours of a gorgeous bunch of flowers, the outline of a piece of rubbish in the road, the vastness of an empty sea, the outlines of buildings, an object in a shop window.

As a base - where I can live and have a studio - I need to be in West Penwith. I find an emptiness and a breathing space that allows me to create; there is a solace and relative quiet here. I also need the Atlantic sea to be in my life on a day to day basis - it is ingrained in the whole of me!

In contrast, the majority of my ideas initially stem from travel and being in cities and experiencing the new - I need a different energy to fuel and to stimulate, even if I come back to the familiar subject matter. The subject matter (a vase of flowers, a house etc.) acts as a container or a vessel or an outline, that can then carry a totally different idea from that which it portrays. I hope this also encourages the viewer to interpret the work in what ever way they choose.

CG Your studio is at Newlyn Art School and you are also an instructor there. How do you balance your teaching responsibilities with your personal artistic practice?

JC At the start of my career I did a lot of freelance teaching, in particular with Tate St Ives - i found it really useful as a way of integrating and learning. I passionately believe in art education and think that the arts should be accessible to everyone from an early age. Mid career, I found it too much bringing up a young family, teaching and exhibiting - so I focused on just my family and my career as a practicing artist. Years later, when I took on my studio at the Newlyn School of Art, I was invited to tutor on various courses, with a focus centred partly around my own practice. This is now ideal as it doesn't interfere with my practice and allows a balance of learning myself, from other people and hopefully helping students to learn through my experiences.



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