

Anya Simmons: painting with colour and light



Our first speaker after the summer break was Anya Simmons. She presented herself as a mixedmedia artist – although it might be more accurate to say that she is a painter working with mixed media in two and a half dimensions.



The Long Walk Home

She radiated enthusiasm, and the enormous pleasure and personal satisfaction she gets from being a full time working artist.

Anya's childhood was spent in Africa, and childhood memories of its people and scenery informed some of her early paintings, often executed in thick acrylic on canvas. The African experience, with its clear light and vibrant colours, surely also informs some of Anya's current work. This, with its sensitivity to light and its wellplaced spots of highlight colour, or the sometimes surprising choices of colour and hue in Anya's rural landscapes, some real, some imagined, leads many to have a dreamlike quality. Equally, the mauves, the reds, and the yellows of Anya's landscapes may be an unconscious carryover from one of her earliest passions – the works of the impressionists, and especially of Monet and Van Gogh. At times she likes her pictures to tell stories, a habit of thought developing out of her first career as a primary school teacher with a particular interest and training in art and craft.

The stylised grace of Anya's African figures, at work, at play, and engaged in movement and dance proved popular. At first she painted new originals in response to commissions – but

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requests for paintings that were similar in composition but different in background colour (to suit individual décor) proved the catalyst by



Hill Top Valley Farm

which support for Anya's art morphed into a family enterprise, drawing on the IT skills of her husband, and requiring an initial investment that is likely to have been significant. By producing giclée prints 'inhouse' Anya is able to guarantee quality control and truth to colour, as well as being able to produce oneoff prints to order, and small print runs. Digital technology also means that pictures can be scaled up or down, with small prints being attractively presented in standardised but bespoke frames, and with Anya herself doing the mounting and assembly to keep costs down and so more affordable to her buyers – and very much cheaper than her artist's originals. These days the range spills over not just into cards, that 'small purchase' staple of so many artists, but also into other merchandise such as coasters.

Anya's first solo exhibition was pretty much a sellout. Africa continues to be a source of inspiration; but she has moved away, at least for the moment, from flower pictures or reinterpretations of, for example, Monet's cathedral series: and has indeed moved away from painting on canvas or heavy impasto executed in acrylic paint. Her light bulb

moment was her discovery of gesso, which now invariably forms her ground, worked on a mountboard support even before she picks up a paintbrush – unless as a modelling tool. The gestural mark marking possible with gesso, both literally and figuratively, through play and experience, and permitting both spontaneity and controlled but expressive manipulation, has enabled Anya to find her own unique artistic voice. The use of gesso does have unintended culinary consequences. Greens with gesso anyone? The telltale residues on table forks and spaghetti servers and other kitchen tools, as well as on her artists' palette knives, are not always welcome at Sunday lunch. In Anya's hands, gesso has become a drawing medium as well as a ground. Having established her foreground, horizon, and background in the gesso, pencil drawing as a guide to indicate focus and detail is minimal. Her second lightbulb moment was, via watercolour, her discovery of acrylic inks, their application ranging from intense colour uninterrupted by the fillers used in paint, to thin washes of translucent, almost fleeting pigmentation. Used as a glaze, the inks allow the very different refractive index of the modelled gesso to shine light through from behind. Two small originals, both seaside scenes, were strangely mesmerising in their painterly qualities of air and light. Gesso also serves as a glue and a glaze – found words are hidden but faintly visible beneath the surface; tiny fragments of newsprint introduce shadow; tissue is collaged in and manipulated with painterly expression reinforcing the movement of water or clouds; and clingfilm, applied, manipulated, and left to dry before being pulled off, models and moves both the wet gesso and the applied colour. Another tool in Anya's armoury is salt, used to lift and bleed colour, the size of the salt crystal determining whether this is to introduce a pinprick of light or a softer haze. Anya was generous both her in her description of her working practices, and in her acknowledgements to other artists who have helped her on her journey.

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Anya tends to work in series. This is a way of allowing one idea lead to the next – but is also a requirement of her chosen way of working, so that the several stages of each image can be allowed to dry before being worked on further. Current inspiration comes from the landscape; and from seaside scenes that are loosely based on a real place. Anya's vivid imagination also goes extraterrestrial – Stratford on Globe Earth as seen from the moon; Banbury on Moon rather than Cherwell; even mouse ballgames – since, after all, the moon IS made of cheese. Anya's pictures are joyous, like their author, and lightly touched with humour.

Anya gave us an insight into her formidable work ethic and resourcefulness, as well as her joy in creation. The winter months are devoted to studio painting in mixed media, with some paintings being surprisingly large, whereas others are large miniatures. The summer is the time for promotion and marketing – solo exhibitions, art fairs, cultivating networks, and restocking galleries – all this requiring a great deal of time and energy, and the graft of delivery, coordination, and mounting and framing, while the giclée prints and other merchandise are produced by an ever supportive husband. Her most recent commercial venture is as part of an artists' cooperative in the Courtyard Gallery at



Shakespear's World

Stratford Garden Centre, a venture that also supports the art charity Escape. The summer gives opportunity, too, to gather new inspiration, recorded in sketch books, small watercolour colour studies, and through the camera lens.

Whether real or imagined, Anya's paintings share a joy for life, and invite a memory of place. As for the pictures themselves – well an image speaks better than a thousand words.

Margaret Condon