



THE WIDER VIEW

A move to the countryside fires up the imagination of British artist **Sarah Bee**, who captures the local landscape in moody, texturally rich pastels.

BY KEN GOFTON

FIVE YEARS AGO, BRITISH ARTIST SARAH BEE MOVED FROM the hustle and bustle of England's capital city to the much quieter surroundings of rural Devon. Her relocation to this coastal landscape in southwest England has been transformational. "On a personal level, I'm much happier away from London, which makes a big difference," she says. "Plus, I'm completely surrounded by all the things that interest me as an artist: rocky coasts, rolling hills, woods and rivers."

Warm Rocks and Cool Water at Haytor Quarry (23x23)



In the city, Bee focused primarily on what she calls “small landscapes”—paintings of a single tree, for instance, or a portion of a hedge. In Devon, she has access to a much wider view. “Now I have these huge, beautiful vistas,” she says, “and that has changed the way I work. I have to decide what has drawn me to this scene, and concentrate on that, which means that at last I can simplify.”

Get the Color “Right”

Bee developed her interpretive approach to color while working in London by allowing herself to make color choices that strayed from reality, as long as her choices felt “right.” Since moving to Devon, she has had many more opportunities to explore the implications of that idea. She avoids, for example, what she refers to as “paint box green,” and instead chooses to render large areas of grass as primarily blue or brown. This allows her to use touches of zingy green where it really matters, as seen in *Signs of Life in the Valley After a Long, Hard Winter* (above, left). Here, as a herald to spring, she has applied the color “like green jewels,” she says, along with touches of pink, creating contrast between the foreground and the more muted shades elsewhere in the painting.

“The colors I use may not be the colors I see, but they have to be ‘right’ on a number of levels,” she explains. “They need to be emotionally right, and also tonally right.” The important thing is not that her color choices be true to life, but that they ultimately present a unified whole. She points to *Tide Out, Wonwell Estuary, Devon* (above, center), as an example. “Here, I’ve used a lot of pink and orange. People might question pink sand, but the Devon rocks have a lot of red in them, and so I’ve used the same colors in both to bring the picture together.”

Let Texture Happen

Bee isn’t a plein air painter. Painting on location doesn’t suit her working methods, which—for one—involves a lot of attention to surface preparation. In the studio, she develops her paintings by relying on sketches and visual memory, backed up with photographs.

Texture is an important element in all her work, although she likes to vary the kind and level of texture within a painting, and from piece to piece. Because she hopes to control—at least to some extent—the texture she creates, she rejects the commercially available gritty pastel surfaces. Instead, she works on mountboard, which she describes as “very forgiving.”

She begins her board preparation by painting the reverse side to prevent warping, using old emulsion paint samples, when possible, as an inexpensive alternative to gesso. This is a stage that can be completed in advance, so she can keep a number of boards ready to go. From this point, however, the preparation of each board relates to the specific subject.

To start a painting, Bee makes a loose sketch and then paints over it with clear gesso, using an old, worn-out house-painting brush. Although she makes no attempt to achieve a smooth finish, the brush marks aren’t totally random. On the contrary, she may use the brush to follow the contours of a hillside, leaving a trail of close, parallel lines rather like hatching. During the preparatory stages of *Towards Two Bridges, Dartmoor* (on page 35), for example, she roughly brushed on the clear gesso in several directions. This texture is picked up in the foreground grasses and the more distant hillsides.

Next, she uses diluted acrylic to apply a loose underpainting. Although she isn’t thinking about detail at this stage, she’s considering what each area is to become and how much underpainting she’ll allow to show through. She may be thinking, for example, about where it would be helpful to have a dark background to make

the later layers of pastel “sing.” Typically, 75 to 90 percent of the acrylic underpainting will be covered by pastel.

Bee lays the board flat on the floor to apply the acrylic. If pools of acrylic accumulate, she dabs them off with a rag, creating yet another surface texture on parts of the board. Finally, she stands the board up, happy to let any remaining wet paint dribble. See the evidence of a dribbly underpainting in the lower portion of *Warm Rocks and Cool Water at Haytor Quarry* (on pages 30 and 31).

The presence of texture from an underpainting adds a dynamic element. “There are lots of different ways to create an energetic surface,” she says. “It has energy because it has been allowed to

PUTTING IT SQUARELY

Not one to be conventional, Bee chooses to paint her landscapes exclusively in a square format. “It does challenge composition,” she says, “but I prefer working with constraints. I get easily overwhelmed by too many possibilities, so I prefer having to make a subject work in a square.” Additionally, the artist has found that she enjoys the coherent look of a body of work that has a repeated format. “It’s probably the former graphic designer in me.”

TAKE IN MORE DYNAMIC VIEWS OF DEVON AT WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/SARAH-BEE-PASTEL-LANDSCAPES.

From left to right:
Signs of Life in the Valley After a Long, Hard Winter (23x23)

Tide Out, Wonwell Estuary, Devon (23x23)

Sand Among the Rocks, Mattiscombe Beach (23x23)



Bee's body-painting work not only provides an additional source of income, but is also a fun way to cultivate creativity.

A FINE BODY OF WORK

In addition to her work as a studio artist, Bee teaches art workshops as a counter-balance to all those solo hours in the studio. She also works as a body-painting artist. That particular skill came about years ago when Bee started thinking about ways she might combine her love of art with her early experience in graphic design and media. "The advertising world appealed," she says, "but I wanted to develop a specialty that would last." Her answer was to take a short course in body painting at a fashion college. "I wanted to pick everyone's brains, get together the kit I needed, and produce a small portfolio of work," she says. "That was 15 years ago, and I'm still going strong."

Her assignments have ranged from airline advertisements to cancer charity campaigns to magazine features, working on projects that required everything from whole-body painting to painting on just the hands or a single limb. "I get asked to do some really odd things," Bee says, "but it's the challenge I enjoy."



Hydrangeas in a Brown Jug (13x8)

A CHANGE OF SUBJECT

Still life subjects provide an occasional break from landscape painting for Bee. "But the same principles apply," she says. "It's about trying to portray the essence of the subject without putting in too much information." Flowers, such as those in *Hydrangeas in a Brown Jug* (above), are well-suited for this. "Hydrangeas offer a lot of opportunities to provide a small amount of information and hint at the rest," she says.

happen." But Bee doesn't want texture throughout. She isn't looking for anything that predictable. "I don't want uniformity across the whole painting," she explains. "I don't want texture everywhere; there have to be quiet places, too."

Think It Through

After the underpainting, Bee re-establishes the drawing, using either charcoal or a light gray pastel over dark areas. She then begins to block in color with Unison pastels. "I used to use only Unison," the artist says, "but now I use the harder Conté sticks almost as much."



There's a strong linear quality to the mark-making in many of her paintings. To get the distinctive effect seen in paintings such as *Towards Two Bridges, Dartmoor* (above), she uses Conté sticks and a "glazing" technique over the underpainting. "The Conté picks up the gesso texture and leaves painted color peeking through the 'troughs' that are untouched," she explains. "You could never draw those lines, one by one, with a pastel. It's stuff like this you find out as you go along."

In other words, much of the painting has been thought through in advance. Bee says that when she's teaching a workshop, she has learned to make students slow down. "They see me making rapid marks in a demonstration, and

they think I've just rushed in and they should do the same," she says. In fact, Bee has found that she works more slowly than other pastel artists she knows, because she likes to spend a lot of time thinking. "Everything is considered," she says, "which is absolutely not the same as saying everything is controlled."

Throughout the painting, Bee continually contemplates what it was that initially drew her to the scene. "It could be the shape of the rocks on a beach, for instance, and then I'll try to make them the heroes of the picture," she says, as she did in *Sand Among the Rocks* (on page 33). "But nothing is set in stone. As the painting evolves, I may conclude that the sea is more important, and then I have to find ways to make it the hero."

Towards Two Bridges, Dartmoor (15½x15½)

"It's about trying to portray the essence of the subject without putting in too much information."



Bee describes herself as impatient and admits to experiencing plenty of frustration during the painting process. “I can be three-quarters of the way through the painting before it begins to work, and then suddenly it begins to pull together—or not. I just love getting the final balance right. “Nine times out of 10, I can bring a painting back if it goes wrong,” she says. “But to do that, I need to hang it on the wall for a week or two. By then, the umbilical cord is gone, and I’m not so emotionally attached. Then I can face wiping off areas and reworking them.”

Try a New Path

Sometimes, Bee’s other work commitments (see “A Fine Body of Work,” on page 34) keep her away

from the studio for lengthy stretches of time. When she returns, she finds it often helps to spend a day simply immersing herself in books about favorite artists, studying their work—not to copy it but to learn from it, to figure out how the artists approached particular challenges.

Edgar Degas (French, 1834-1917) is one continuing source of inspiration. Bee is also attracted to the work of a number of British landscape artists, including John Piper (English, 1903-1992), John Brown (Scottish, 1945-) and Kurt Jackson (English, 1961-). She also singles out the Royal Academician and abstract landscape artist Barbara Rae (Scottish, 1943-). “I never paint like her, and wouldn’t want to, but I love her strong use of color,” Bee says.



Small Olive Trees, Skopelos
(15½x15½)

Valley (opposite;
23x23)

Wanting to see continual evolution in her work, Bee tries to think about the direction it might take. In her recent painting, *Warm Rocks and Cool Water at Haytor Quarry*, for example, which won the 2014 Caran D’Ache Award at The Pastel Society UK Exhibition in June, she explored the idea of contrasting one major area in a primary color—the water—with the remainder of the piece kept to predominantly neutral tones. The area of darker blue in the foreground, implying deep water and shadow, both heightens the contrast and gives the viewer more to ponder.

“I also do virtual paintings in my head. They’re all masterpieces, of course,” she says with a smile. But the practice generates ideas. The artist has decided recently—as a result of these mental workouts—that she’d like to introduce graphite into her work. “It might not work in reality, but in my mind it’s the next thing to explore,” she says. “I just think it could add more texture.”

Exploring new ideas and attempting new techniques is all part of the creative process.

In the same way that Bee was open to a change in environment from city to countryside, she is willing, even eager, to continue taking her art in new directions, too. ■

KEN GOFTON is a contributing writer to *Pastel Journal*. The freelance arts writer lives in Kent, in England.



Born in the English coastal county of Dorset, Sarah Bee (www.sarahbee.com) studied graphic design at Maidstone College of Art and went on to work as a designer at National Magazines. Later, she studied watercolor painting part time at the Heatherley School of Art, London. It wasn’t until she participated in workshops with the late John Blockley—an artist, author, teacher and former president of The Pastel Society UK—that she began using pastels. “He didn’t so much teach as inspire,” she says. “He provided the big turning point for me.” Bee was elected to membership in The Pastel Society UK in 2005 and has garnered a number of prizes in its exhibitions, including the prestigious Unison Pastel Award in 2012 and the Caran D’Ache Award in 2014.