

Alchemy: Sally Stokes: Q&A

Q1: You've mentioned in past articles your enjoyment of painting en plein air. Could you share more about your approach to this technique and what you find fulfilling about it.

SS: I don't exhibit the work I do plein air — it's a place to get ideas, observe and be connected to a particular landscape. The more you look and draw, the more is revealed — the unexpected, the surprises — it's not so much looking at, but seeing our place in the world; the awe, the love, the annoyances — yesterday it was the flies — the joys — an emerald green grasshopper— a white moth — the continual changes — light, movement, wind. All is possible. It's an opportunity to quickly connect, to find a new line, movement, colour and composition with all the emotional undertones, the thoughts it triggers and the way the hand responds. And then it changes! By sitting and being in the landscape, you feel you're part of the transience of the world. Gradually a 'silence' occurs and me and my work enter a different place.

Q2: Abstract landscapes are a prominent feature of your work. Has this style always felt natural to you, or did it develop over time? Can you walk us through the evolution of your artistic style during your extensive career.

SS: I have always had an affinity with landscape as distinct from portraits or still life, the three broad categories of western art training. From a young child I felt a connection to Gauguin and his use of colour and mystery. Cezanne, Matisse and Bonnard intrigued me in my high school days. Landscapes have awe and mystery for me — so it's never been the literal observation that has ignited me — but the unknown, the explorations, the strangeness — it asks for distilling and so an abstract portrayal of it seems natural. Over time, as I paint each painting, it seems always full of the unknown,

exploring surprises, joys, doubts, working through to find this life force that connects, that makes a painting the experience it is.

Q3: In a past interview about your exhibition “Journey to the interior”, you described a methodical approach to your paintings, often taking over a month to complete each piece. Has this method always been your preferred way of working, or have experimented with different approaches? Are there any pieces you’re proud of that deviated from this routine?

SS: The painting itself seems to ask the things it requires. I have developed habits — I tend to work on series e.g., we travel to the East Macdonnells for a month — I draw and paint plein air — so I might have 1,000 ideas in charcoal, graphite, gouache and acrylic paintings — when I return home I surround myself with these ideas and work on two or three paintings at once — each sparks reactions from my imagination and memories triggered by the exploratory drawings. Once I’ve started, it doesn’t seem as much a routine, as a journey into the unknown — discoveries, colour pushes (it always ends up being about the colour and moving of space within the canvas) — what the place asks for and what I have to give to it. Some paintings are slower, some are quicker, they all seem themselves at the time — but I look back and they all seem connected.

Q4: Your art has been showcased in various exhibitions and residencies across the globe. How do you view the universal appeal of visual art, especially in terms of its ability to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries and foster connections among people?

SS: We can grow our innateness through art across the centuries; our feeling for the value of humanity; the mystery of us being here at all; art has a power to stimulate who we are. I personally prefer the Giotto’s to the Titian’s — both use colour beautifully, but what is it that gives us a personal preference? We

can learn to know parts of ourselves through art and taste. It can be a solace for the destructive side of humankind — the killings, the injustices, the plundering of our planet. It can bring hope and redemption and change in a nuanced way. The joys of a Cycladic sculpture and its simplicity to the rawness of a De Kooning — the energy in Chinese calligraphy all help us connect to the great mystery.

Q5: Your art is instantly recognisable for its vibrant colours and textures which often evoke a sense of joy. Do you intentionally infuse your work with a sense of playfulness and joy? If so, what drives this intention behind your art?

SS: Thank you. The world is a complex place — busy, rushed, always too much happening; but paintings for me bring one to another place — they need time, sitting with; they evoke emotions, questions; they give time for reflections and insights. Joy is fleeting— colour combinations, marks and texture seem to bring the possibility closer to this life force that activates. For me, it seems to be a byproduct of searching through uncertainty.

Q6: Collaboration and community can play vital roles in the artistic journey. Have you collaborated with other artists or participated in community-based projects, and if so, how has this influenced your work?

SS: My artistic community passes through the centuries; visiting galleries; seeing other artist's work; being inspired that in this solitary path I am not alone.

Although I often go drawing with other artists, my work is done in private and hopefully some magic will happen. Our drawing groups are definitely not show and tell!!!

Q7: Your titles often reference renowned Australian poets, and you've spoken about your deep connection to the Australian landscape. How has this dual influence of Australian literature and the natural scenery shaped your artistic outlook and perspective?

SS: My husband reads me a poem most mornings — it transforms the beginnings of our days. We started this ‘habit’ when travelling in our van to the deserts of Australia — it’s a way of connecting to the ‘otherness’ of being human. We have read many Australian poets including Les Murray, Sarah Holland-Batt, Robert Adamson and Philip Hodges, but it is the American poet, Mary Oliver, who writes of the life force that I try and get in my paintings; the startling moment of realising our place in the world, the beauty of that connection and the energy and humility it gives. The poems articulate both the smallness and largeness of being human amongst the complexity of the natural world: love awe humour connection — Australia is where I live; it has an incredible diversity, a complex ecology that people have continually related to and moved amongst for thousands of years — it shapes the way I move through it.

Q8: Looking ahead, what are some artistic goals or projects you're excited to explore in the future?

SS: One hope is that people feel that life force that I try to paint, when they experience my paintings. That they can sit for hours or moments and be transported to another place. So, thanks for having an exhibition of my work. I hope to continue drawing, painting and being in nature to connect to that great diversity and mystery of what this life is.