



NEW BOHEMIAN

MARY MIERS meets the artist Hugo Grenville, a Colourist working in the Romantic tradition

MAP in hand, I am navigating my way north to meet the artist Hugo Grenville in his new studio. The journey itself is an adventure. I have passed the Turkish Bank and several *meze* bars, specialist *patisseries* and kebab houses; next comes Istanbul Travel and the Muzik Marketi Yetkili Bayii, followed by the Basak Supermarket, Erbiller Jewellery, the Anatolian People's Cultural Centre, Jadesa Export & Import, Tac Wedding Warehouse, Pak Butchers and the Ensar Bookshop. Opposite the blue-and-white-tiled Aziziye Mosque (with a *halal* butcher between its gold-domed towers), a frightened young Turk is being body-searched by five policemen. I turn right into a quiet residential street, and only now does the architecture of neat terraced housing remind me that I'm still in North London, where the boundaries of Stoke Newington and Hackney merge.

Here, at the end of a cobbled lane, a community of artists has colonised an old chocolate factory, setting up their studios in two balconied blocks opening onto a plant-filled courtyard. Mr Grenville greets me in a paint-splattered smock, his appearance, combined with the artfully composed disorder of his galleried studio, the very picture of English Bohemian style.

The whitewashed interior is huge and hung with vibrant oils; among its furnishings an old painted dresser filled with china and a pedimented bookcase. Flowered chintzes and exotic fabrics drape sofas

and tables laden with vases of flowers and jugs filled with pencils and brushes, all composed into seemingly effortless still-life arrangements that reveal a love of pattern and colour. Mr Grenville's passion for the decorative in art is borne out by the paintings he shows me stacked around the walls—the body of his forthcoming solo exhibition in Cork Street. 'What interests me is the play between dimensions, shifting our perception of what we see by slightly flattening the 3D and distorting the 2D, so that, suddenly, something new and different is revealed. A painting has to have that revelatory quality.'

Many are the interior scenes for which Mr Grenville

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is best known, paintings that have the intimacy of works by Vuillard and invariably contain a 'nude or draped nude'. 'Put a living, breathing figure beside a patterned textile or a vase of plastic flowers,' he says, 'and suddenly the inanimate object comes to life, becomes something new.'

His figures tend to be expressionless: 'If you paint a face in a conventional way, it completely changes the picture; I paint still lifes with a figure, not portraits.'



Picture of a painter: Hugo Grenville with one of his vibrant, still lifes in his artfully disordered studio, on the site of a chocolate factory

A protégé of Ken Howard, Mr Grenville sees himself as a crusader in the world of figurative painting in an era when the post-Impressionist tradition has been largely ignored by the art establishment. In America, he is marketed as the 'British Colourist—continuing the conversation with painting in a language known to Matisse and Bonnard'. He describes his visit to the Fauve retrospective in Paris in 1999 as his 'road to Damascus'. 'I'd always loved colour and decorative pattern-making, but my earlier work was more influenced by the dark, earthy English tonal tradition of Sickert.' Since then, he has adopted his trademark palette

of peacock greens, duck-egg blues, mauves and violets—colours that he also uses daringly in the rooms of his own house. 'If I had more time, I'd decorate the way that Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell did at Charleston, that wonderful expression of creativity and *joie de vivre*.

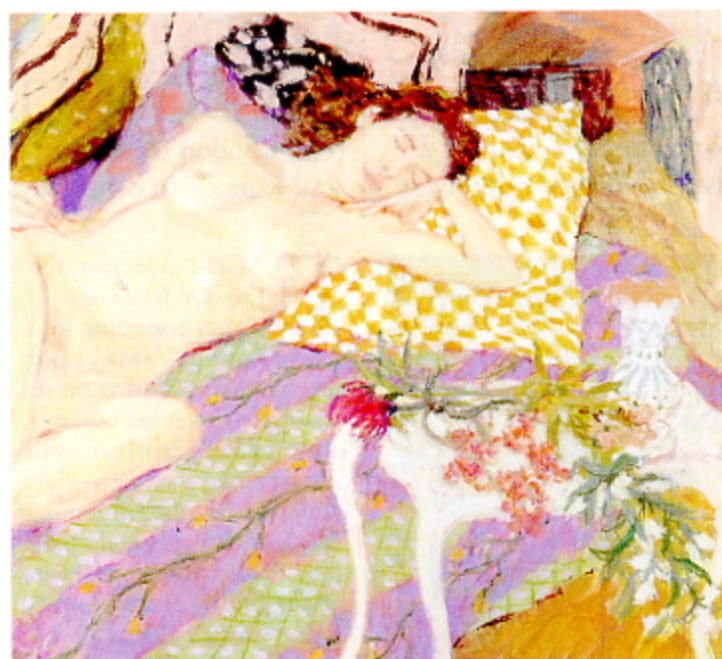
'I love experimenting with the way that colours work—pushing them as far as they can go,' he says, and this is the theme of his new show—each painting the visual equivalent of a musical key. A series of black-and-white drawings will be hung between the paintings, 'bridging the different colour keys, and at the same time allowing them to exist

independently without being jostled'. His latest works have become more subjective and intense, using colour in a non-literal way to evoke 'something about how the world feels rather than looks'.

A great nephew of Harold Peto and the son of artistic parents, Mr Grenville won the school art prize every year, but he didn't go to art school. Instead, he progressed from Eton to the Coldstream Guards, where he always had his painting kit ready to hand when on active service and was known as Picasso by his fellow soldiers. On leaving the army, he embarked on 'an unhappy year in advertising', followed by five years dealing in corporate art. During this time, he studied painting part-time and started exhibiting in London. It was Nancy Farquharson, a friend of his mother's, who inspired him to take up art full-time. 'She was an actress, whose friends included Peggy Ashcroft and Stanley Spencer. She was one of Mark Gertler's staunchest patrons, and her house in Hampstead was a monument to 20th-century British art. When I was 30, she said to me: "You'll be wasting your life if you don't get on and paint" and I realised that my fantasy of becoming a proper painter could become a reality.'

So, in 1989, he sold his London flat and car and started to paint full-time, living cheaply in the country. Various exhibitions made him enough to keep going and then, from 1995 to 2006, he was signed up by Messum's. He now shows with the New York gallery Wally Findlay, and in London with Josie Eastwood.

Mr Grenville's artistic career owes much to a certain restlessness of nature, a contrary streak that from time to time has prompted



Still life with sleeping nude and chequered pillow, 34in by 36in



Duck-egg blues and violet: Tower Bridge, spring afternoon, 38in by 46in

him to defy convention and opt for the unexpected.

'I clearly suffer from wanderlust—I'm excited by change,' he says, explaining his recent move from the rural idyll of the Waveney Valley to Crouch End in North London. In 1996, he and his wife, Sophie, an innovation consultant, fell in love with a derelict Georgian farmhouse on the Norfolk/Suffolk border, which they had seen advertised in a local paper.

They restored it from dereliction and established a successful summer painting school in a studio in the garden. However, 'although it was blissfully quiet and I have very happy memories of swimming and boating in the river, I missed the stimulation of a culturally diverse environment; I felt we were too young to ossify in the country'.

So, in 2005, they sold their seven-bedroom house and, in a direct financial swap,

bought a solid, late Victorian house on the same ridge as Highgate. 'We looked in Hampstead, but it was too expensive, so we went east. Crouch End found us—I'd never heard of it before.'

What a discovery it was: 'We spent the first few weeks just wandering about ogling the amazing food opportunities—great mounds of pomegranates, pyramids of Pyrenean cheeses, *patisseries* of every description. In the 1970s, Crouch End was full of teachers and psychotherapists and was known as Shrinkers' End, my barber tells me; now it's become quite arty.'

Every morning, Mr Grenville and his basset hound walk for 50 minutes across Finsbury and Clissold Parks to his studio, where he paints with a live model two days a week and also runs a programme of painting and drawing courses. Curiously, returning to London has given him the urge to paint landscapes again, after painting almost none for a decade. 'I respond to them as I do to interiors—to the colours and textures and the patterns they create.'

He shows me a view of what might be a Capability Brown landscape seen from the window of a country house; in fact, it is the pond in Clissold Park. 'At the moment, I'm going through an urban phase of my life, but who knows? I may move on in five years.'

Hugo Grenville's forthcoming exhibition is at Josie Eastwood Fine Art, Gallery 27, Cork Street, London W1, from November 12 to 17 (www.hugogrenville.com and www.josieeastwood.com). His next series of painting and drawing courses will be in March and April 2008; email hugo@hugogrenville.com for a brochure

NEXT WEEK: Drawings from the Rothschild Collection