

# Hugo's at home with his new style



EADT Arts Editor **Andrew Clarke** talks to Suffolk artist Hugo Grenville

Three years ago Suffolk-based artist Hugo Grenville had just emerged from the dark creative block of his professional career. His despair was so great that he ended up creating a bonfire out of nine month's work. Today the situation could not be more different: "Now I have so many ideas the problem is trying to find the time to do something about them all."

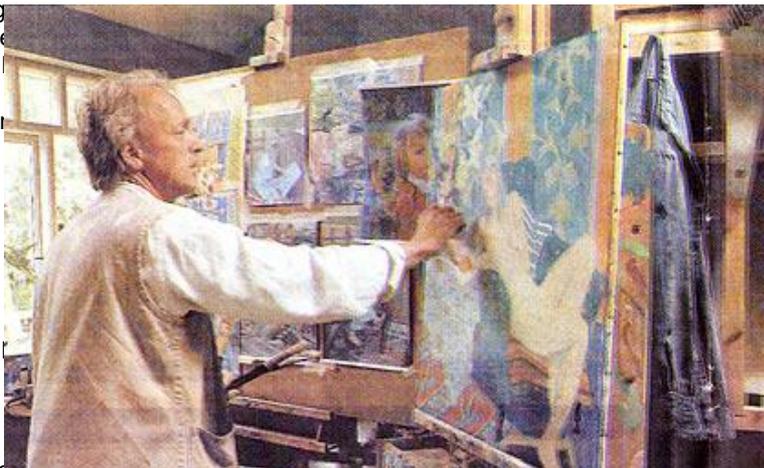
Hugo is having an open studio exhibition tomorrow at his home at The Red House Mendham, near Harleston, which will explore the full diversity of his work.

The former captain in the Coldstream Guards is best known for his atmospheric, evocative oil paintings of nudes and house interiors. But this exhibition will show the other side of his artistic vision - a collection of local landscapes and quickfire studies of figures for reference when working up full scale oils or for portraits.

"I am really excited about this exhibition because it's the first time I've done anything like this - open my doors to the public - but also the first time I've had such a diverse exhibition."

He's keen to ensure that the pictures are affordable. Prices range from £500 to £1,000 - which are considerably cheaper than you would find at Hugo's exhibitions in Cork Street, London.

"I am very concerned about how expensive things are in London and I didn't realise until recently that I had never had a proper exhibition in Suffolk, so I thought this would



Top: A portrait of Hugo's son Oscar, aged 8; Hugo in his studio; Above right: Mendham Marshes in late summer; Above left: Brancaster Staithe.

It's a light, bright and breezy world where strong complimentary colours conjure up a place where it's always spring or summer. It's art to lift the heart - which is a long way from Hugo's life as a soldier,

be an ideal opportunity to remedy both situations."

All the paintings, drawings and lithographs in the exhibition reflect a more informal side of his personality. "They are very quick and immediate pieces. Done very much to capture the moment. We have 35 Pochard landscapes, small panels - the majority of which were done in and around Mendham or in the Waveney Valley - and the sort of thing I do when I have finished a sitting or work on a larger picture and I see something that captures my imagination.

"One of my favourites, one of the few not from Suffolk, is Cape Cornwall and was done after working with Rose Hilton, widow of the late Roger Hilton. We were out for a walk and we saw this wonderful sunset. I literally had half an hour to capture the moment before it was gone and this is typical of all the pictures in the exhibition - they are fast informal pictures, done quickly to capture a moment."

This also applies to the gouache studies of figures and portrait figures which he does in preparation for a full blown oil painting. Although there are striking similarities between Hugo's impressive oils, they give off a much freer - almost impressionistic feel. If you are familiar with Hugo's work then there is a fascinating game of spot the difference to be played, comparing the study with the original.

There will also be a handful of still lifes which illustrate how inter-connected all Hugo's work is - his use of colour and his atmospheric use of light.

A look at his still life work shows how his style has evolved over the years. The pictures have become less literal, more stylised, he says. They have become an interesting mix between patterns, shapes and colour. This also applies to his landscape and figure work where the colour and light helps to set the mood of the work.

Looking through Hugo Grenville's portfolio and you see a bright, sunny almost Mediterranean world. It's an optimistic world, full of colour and light.

It's also a very domestic world with figures enjoying a brief respite from the heat of the day either lounging in a chair with sunshine streaming in at the window or a lone nude lying on a bed.

during which saw service in Rhodesia and Northern Ireland.

Although Hugo comes from an artistic background - his father and uncles were all accomplished amateur artists - he is the first member of his family to make a living from his work.

"I always knew I wanted to be a painter. I did fairly well at school in art. I won various prizes basically because no one else did very much, but it gave me a boost. I hated sport. I couldn't play sports at all - hopeless - so I sought refuge in clay and paint.

"After I left school at 18, having done the hippy trail to India, I went for a job at Sothebys and basically they told me to clear off. They suggested that I live a little and the chap who interviewed me suggested I join the Army. My parents were divorced by this time and I was told that there was no money to be had from them so I had to do something to earn a living. I followed that chap's advice and joined the Coldstream Guards and hated every minute of it."

Throughout his five-year tour of duty with the Coldstream Guards he was painting all the time. "One of the greatest assets of the British Army is that they draw their officers from a very broad range of interests, so although I didn't exactly fit the model of a career soldier I wasn't made to feel completely out of place."

In fact during Hugo's final year in the Army he served as aide de camp to the British commander of NATO forces in Germany. "It was an incredible experience, one I would never want to repeat but not one I would forget either."

Having left the Army he joined leading American advertising firm J Walter Thompson. "I was so bored. During meetings I used to look out of the window that overlooked Berkley Square looking at the colours, shadows beneath the trees. Let me tell you the shadows were an awful lot more interesting than anything that was going on at the meetings."

Hugo left after a year and with a friend started his own art dealership before selling his share of the business after five years and opting to paint full time. "I was going to life classes most evenings at this point and it had become difficult for me to function if I wasn't painting.

Hugo and his wife Sophie moved to Suffolk in 1996, bought an old redundant farmhouse and turned it into the family home and studio. It is from here that Hugo also runs his art courses which provides him with a valuable link to like minded souls. (contd..)

"I really enjoy doing the courses because it puts me in touch with other people. The problem with being an artist tend to be trapped in your studio painting away and contact with the outside world."

Hugo has discovered that the internet can also provide the world at large when a gallery from the United States asking if they could exhibit some of his work.

"At first I was a bit sceptical, I have to confess, but I talked on the phone and then I looked at the gallery website which was very stylish, and I think the reason he sought me out is because they are based in San Francisco, and San Francisco has very European sensibility.

"Also the owner, Ian Fraser is the son of a Glaswegian painter who settled in California in the 1950's. Anytime he came to see me over here and he fell completely in love with East Anglia. I have a part share in a fishing boat in Aldeburgh and I took him out in that. We visited Soham and he was completely overwhelmed by the world here. It's a completely different experience to what he used to in California."

All this change is currently recharging Hugo's creative batteries. He has recently installed a new kiln and he has started work on illustrating a series of poems by William Philip Welles.

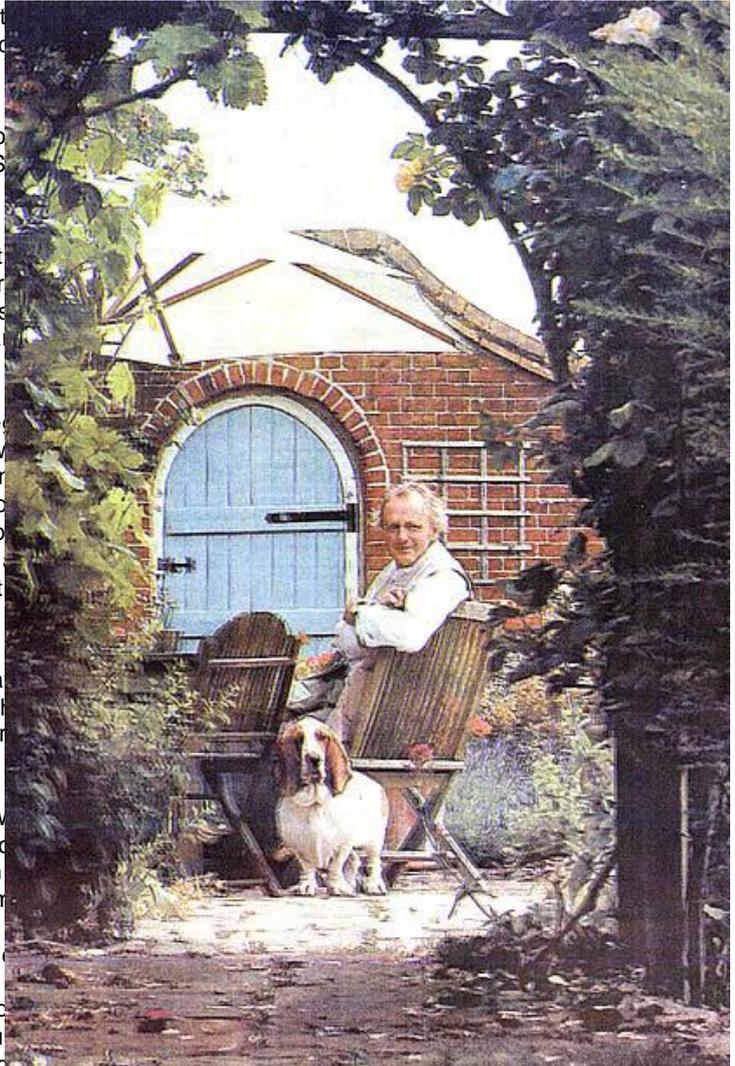
"The ceramics idea is a bit more experimental. It's something I would like to try, and we'll see how it works. I've a few ideas but I'll be feeling my way forward for at least a year. But the illustration work is very exciting. In the 1950's Faber and Faber used to publish small pamphlets containing a poem and a specially commissioned illustration and I thought it would be a wonderful idea to do something similar now.

"Philip Welles is a friend of mine and a wonderful poet, he has come up with 12 new poems which I am currently illustrating. We are printing the poem and illustration as a sort of upmarket greetings card. They will retail at something like £4.99 and people can either collect them or send them as thank you cards or notes to friends.

"They are being published over 18 months from next spring and when they are all done we are thinking about binding them together and issuing them as a book."

The illustration work has also revealed another side of his creative style and is a hybrid of the detailed approach to his formal oil paintings and his more impressionistic drawings and sketches.

"It's all about evolution really. It's quite an exciting time for me at the moment. In many ways it's a period of transition but I'm not throwing the baby out with the bath water; my work will still be recognisably me, but I am very excited to be exploring new territory. I think you can get stuck in a rut if you are not careful. It can be a nice comfortable rut but it's still a rut and it does you good to get out and try something new."



Hugo with dog Hera in his garden

Looking at his work from the early 1990's, he says he remains surprised at how much it has changed over the years from dark earthy tones, characterising his period in London to a bright, cheerful, colour palette he uses today.

"Creativity is something you have no control over. It's a need to express yourself."

Hugo is also pleased that visitors to his open studio and exhibition will also get to see his garden which he has spent increasing amounts of time taming until it has become a paradise.