

EADT24



Artist Hugo Grenville

Suffolk artist returns home

Thursday, 15 April, 2010

17:00 PM

Artist Hugo Grenville admits that he now knows the full meaning of the old adage: 'You never know what you've got until you've lost it.'



In 2007, after living in Suffolk for 10 years, Hugo and his family decided to sell their farmhouse and move to London.

At the time, Hugo decided it was time to raise his profile. He had just parted company with his London gallery and felt that he needed to explore different avenues and 'be seen' more.

A year after moving wife and family into central London, it became apparent just how much they all missed Suffolk – especially the children. So last winter with snow still covering the ground, the Grenville's sold up their big Victorian house in London, bought a small flat and started to search for a new family home back in Suffolk.

"As soon as we moved back to London we seemed to spend many weekends in the car, coming back to Suffolk, begging beds, staying with friends and I thought: 'This is ridiculous, so last year we spent most of the summer holidays driving around looking for somewhere back in Suffolk.'"



They ended up with a new farmhouse just three miles from their old home but Hugo's need for projects means that it's not the sort of property you just walk into – it's a semi-derelict farmhouse which he plans to turn into a home, a studio and a base for his summer school.

"Last year we spent a weekend with some friends in Aldeburgh. Saturday afternoon they had something they had to do, so we took ourselves to Southwold and the boys who are now 15 and 12 decided to go crabbing and we sat there eating bacon sandwiches from that café by the Blyth, looking at the boats, we were sitting on this breakwater as a family, and it was a seminal moment, we realised how much we missed Suffolk and knew we had to come back.

"London is a hugely exciting and stimulating place but Suffolk had got more under our skin than we realised. The boys, in particular, loved it here and missed it terribly when we were in London. They just wanted to spend time here."

He said that as soon as they had made the decision to move back to Suffolk, aspects of his professional life started coming into sharper focus.



"I knew immediately that we could move the summer school, which is currently based in Hackney, here – which makes much more sense."

He said that the process of finding a place was very soul-destroying because they wanted a house which they could put their own stamp on. "We got quite forlorn because either they were done up to the nines or they would cost an absolute fortune to convert. We were working on a budget because although we had sold the London house we had put half the money into a flat in London and the other half was for the Suffolk house.

"And we started at Ufford and worked our way up towards Southwold and across to Beccles. We found this place and we thought it so wild, so amazing that we put an offer in even though we couldn't see it properly because the whole area was buried under six feet of snow.

The last five years have provided Hugo with something of a creative rebirth. He parted company with Messum's his long-term London gallery in favour of independently curated exhibitions and also started a very profitable relationship with an American gallery with outlets in New York and Florida.

He said that the opportunity to show his work in the United States had made him free-up his painting style which had resulted in his work becoming more impressionistic over the past few years.

"My recent paintings are recognisably mine but they are looser, more imaginative, less a representation, more of a re-invention of a scene. My work has definitely moved forward. One's confidence dips and rises. It never runs along a straight line, it's a continual heart patient's graph and at the moment it's on the up."

He said that the offer to show in the United States came out of the blue when he arrived home to discover a message on his answer-machine. The caller was New York art dealer James Borynack, president of the Wally Findlay Galleries, wanting to talk about the possibility of Hugo staging an exhibition of his work in New York.

"What I didn't know was that one of my students had taken a catalogue of mine to the Wally Findlay gallery in Palm Beach, shown to the guy who ran that gallery and he phoned the directors in New York and the president phoned me.

"I knew that I wouldn't be able to manage a big gallery in New York and one in London as well. There wouldn't be enough hours in the day to keep both galleries supplied with work and that brought to a head what had been a deteriorating relationship with David Messum."

He said that the American experience had given him the creative kick he was looking for. "I had a show in October 2006 in New York and another in Palm Beach in February last year and I have another scheduled for next May in New York. It's been a terrific experience for me. They are lovely people. It's a big gallery. They go back to 1870 and what's interesting is that they have very few contemporary painters – only about 15 worldwide – and they are those painters who work in, what they call, a language which would be understood by the post-impressionists. Basically they are only interested in artists who have a dialogue with the great painting of the 19th and 20th centuries.

"That's has put a real spring in my step, I have to say. It's given me a new burst of confidence to push my work in new directions."

He said that in recent years his work has been influenced by artists like Matisse. The use of light has always played an important role in Grenville's work. He frequently places his models at rest in sun lit rooms or does still life studies in conservatories flooded with summer sunshine.

"What I hope is happening now is that instead of showing a light source, the light is coming from within the subject. Although I like a lot of light, I don't try and create a sense of direct natural light. I have the confidence to move blocks of light and shade around."

He credits James Borynack with being a very lucid and perceptive critic who has encouraged him to develop in directions which he may have been reticent about exploring. "He is a visually literature mentor and he is well versed in the art I love."

For Hugo, his life has been a lifelong quest to refine his artistic identity. 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 Sotheby's 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."

He trained at Sandhurst – spending his weekends with his school chums at university. "I stuck out like a sore thumb. I'd turn up with my ridiculously short military haircut, getting out of my head and having a great time before having to sober up and go back to training."

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 was this house he sold in order to finance his now ill-fated move to London. He is moving back to a property just three miles from the one he left behind.

His new house, close to the Suffolk/Norfolk border is what Hugo describes as “a typical Grenville project”. It’s being gutted and remodelled by Hugo and local builders during the summer. His wife Sophie and sons Hector and Oscar are moving in later this summer and the building work will carry on around them. Hugo’s aim is to move his summer school back to Suffolk, having held classes in London for the last couple of years. Grenville loves teaching because it keeps in touch with like-minded souls. “Painting can be a very isolating job. It’s just you beaver away in the studio. You may have a model there sometimes but for most part you are not chatting away to her, you are concentrating on what is going down on your canvas or on your drawing pad.

“Teaching allows you to talk to people, exchange ideas, pass on some of the things you have picked up along the way and harness ideas from the students. It’s an exchange of information and ideas.”

Hugo has been teaching fledgling artists to paint since 1990. The courses are very much focused on developing skills. Students are encouraged to push themselves to the next level by acquiring technique and self-belief. His London studio is in a Victorian chocolate factory in Dalston, set in an established artists’ community down a cobbled street - an area where you’ll find an exotic mix of Turkish baths, African textiles and food from every continent.

In comparison, Olhao, Portugal, another teaching venue offers a retreat from work and daily life, allowing students – especially beginners to focus on their painting. There is a medieval market town, close by along with rural landscapes, Mediterranean seascapes and harbours providing a wealth of inspiration. Hugo hopes that next year his Suffolk house will provide a rural escape and a focus on landscape painting.

“In fact one of the very odd ironies of moving back to London was that no sooner was I back there than I became incredibly interested in painting landscapes again. I am really looking to working back here in Suffolk and getting to grips with the Suffolk landscape.”

Places are still available on Hugo Grenville’s art classes this year including: Introduction to Oils - London, June 9-11 (3 days), Nuts and Bolts of Picture Making - London, June 14-18; Understanding Colour - London June 21-25; Colour in the Landscape including Part 1 The Figure in the Landscape and Part 2 Interpreting Colour – Portugal October 2-16. More information online at www.hugogrenville.com

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