



Photo:
ANDY ABBOTT

Inspired by Suffolk's big skies, its light and landscape

Suffolk artist Hugo Grenville decided to sell up and move to London but, as he tells Arts Editor ANDREW CLARKE, within three years he had realised his mistake and has returned home to found a new art school

SUFFOLK artist Hugo Grenville has decided to make the most of the county's big skies by launching an art school from his studio based in the heart of the countryside.

The artist, who has a talent for capturing the intensity of both light and colour in his works, moved into the former farm cottage two years ago and has decided to shift his art courses from his London studio in Hackney to his new base in the heart of the county.

Hugo, who has regular exhibitions in London and New York, said: "I lived in Suffolk for many, many years but then about seven years ago decided to sell up and move to London because I felt that I needed to be in the heart of the capital. I needed to be at the heart of the art world.

"But, I didn't cut my links with Suffolk entirely. We came back for holidays and came back to visit friends and I realised very quickly that not only did I miss Suffolk but my family did too. My wife and my boys missed it dreadfully. They missed the space and the freedom that a life in the country affords.

"So we swapped our house in London for a flat and bought a house in the rural Suffolk in St James South Elmham which was in a very poor state which we have enjoyed turning into what is very much our home."

Hugo has also turned farm outbuildings into a studio complex which, not only, provides him with workspace but also gives him a place to run his courses.

He said that the process of finding a place in the country was very soul-destroying because they wanted a house which they could put their own stamp on. "We were working on a budget and got quite forlorn because either they were done up to the nines or they would cost an absolute fortune to convert.

"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."

Having spent much of his freetime constructing their dream home, he is now about to return to teaching. He says that teaching has helped give his own work a new burst of life – making his recent work much more impressionistic.

Light frequently floods his pictures and you are never entirely sure where the light source is coming from.

This is reflected by the design of his studio which is surrounded on all sides by large windows looking out onto open fields and those famous Suffolk skies. Even on cloudy, overcast days light floods into the room and Hugo transfers this to his canvases.

He loves windows and likes blurring the line between what is inside and what is outside. He said that as his work has taken on a greater impressionist influence he works hard at keeping a light touch. He is wary of appearing too heavy-handed.

"I don't want to paint pictures that look anyway agonised over. They are, for me, celebrations of life. They are about light and colour and the things that make one want to get up in the morning.

"There is enough social realism around these days but I don't think that's where my skill lies. I think it is a very legitimate reason for painting, certainly for someone like Lucien Freud, it was his reason for getting up in the morning but it's not me.

"I have made a very conscious decision to separate my work from the time in which we live. If you look at Matisse you couldn't tell from his work that he was living in Vichy France and that his daughter had been caught working for the French Resistance. None of these terrible life dramas found their way into his paintings, because he was working on a



View from the Studio, Winter



Sleeping Nude with Alstromeria

plain which invited you to leave the here and now and look at art existing in a space for all time."

He said that he finds that view reassuring because it frees you from whatever domestic crisis you are in, enabling you to invest in the work which exists for all time.

"Art can go a very long way in transcending the bad episodes in life. It can free you – whether it's painting or listening to great music or going to the theatre, it can take you out of the moment and provide you with a life outside reality.

"What I aspire to do is not paint pictures about 2011 but paint subjects which are relevant for all time."

Hugo 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."

He said that his courses are designed to provide an intense workshop experience for painters at all levels. They are designed for artists who wish to improve their technique, skills or the way that they look at the world.

"There are two strands to the courses. The first thing is to give the students enough of the tools to allow them a reasonable chance to express what they feel.

"For example, if you were teaching the piano, you wouldn't teach interpretation before you had taught the students their scales. The same applies to art. They have got to have some kind of framework.

"One of the reasons we get a lot of people straight from art school is because art schools have given up teaching the basics. They are much more about teaching ideas and they have turned their back on the fact that young artists need to know about paint and what happens when you mix one colour with another or mix and match media, it's basic stuff but it is important and if you don't know it, it is very easy to get demoralised when you can't realise on paper what you see in your head."

He said that that the Hugo Grenville courses offer students the opportunities to pick up traditional painting skills.

"We hope that by the end of the course that they are able to express visually what they can't articulate verbally. If you feel deep down that you may be an artist and then to do able to realise that is tremendously exciting and that gives me and my fellow tutor Lisa Freeman, huge pleasure.

"We can see that after two weeks, people have made giant strides and they have to confidence to let go and stop being self-conscious."

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.

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 enjoying working back here in Suffolk and getting to grips with the Suffolk landscape."

The last five years have provided Hugo



Nude by Hugo Grenville, 2003

The Jug of Flowers, Harvest Time



SURROUNDED BY COLOURFUL INSPIRATION:
Hugo Grenville's studio Photo: FRANCISCO PRETTEL

with something of a creative rebirth. In 2003, he was so disillusioned with his work that he piled a sizeable number of completed canvases into a large heap in his garden and set light to them. He then parted company with Messum's his long-term London gallery, and opted for a series of independently curated exhibitions in the capital and then started a very profitable relationship with influential Wally Findlay Gallery with outlets in New York and Florida.

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 originally 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 has now moved back and is just three miles from the property he left behind. After 18 months of being gutted and remodelled by Hugo and local builders his new house is now both a family home and a base for Hugo's summer courses which include beginners oil painting, tone, composition and visual language and understanding colour.

■ For more details on Hugo Grenville's art courses go to www.hugogrenville.com or email courses@hugogrenville.com

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