

## SIMON BIRD ART Newsletter: March 2020



*Intuitive sketch in biro*

As I write this update the television is playing in the background; a newsflash about the Coronavirus. The human world is stalling, and it's just started to rain, even though the forecast predicted a fine day.

It seems somehow selfish and petty to compose a newsletter, updating you about my art practice; and also a little bit strange feeling upbeat about my direction of travel when everything around me seems to be so – and now I'm struggling to find the right word – difficult? worrying? scary? I don't recall a time when I felt so out of control and uncertain about the future.

But it's also important that we recognise our good fortune. That is my motivation for writing now – to record and be thankful for the last few months of thinking, making and enjoying my work.....and of course to thank you for your support. Its rewarding to know I have people who are interested in and enjoy what I do.

In this newsletter I introduce my focus for 2020 and the work I've started so far. I continue to find an infinite wonder in the natural world around me. That at least is not stalling as we tip from winter into spring...

Thanks again for your support and please stay well,

**Simon**

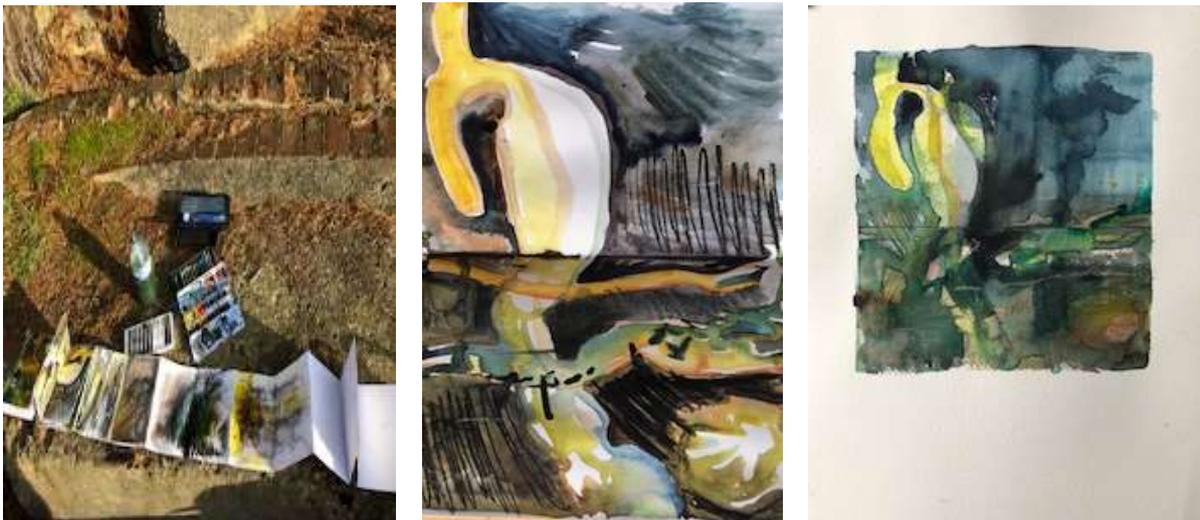
Camberley, Surrey

## WHAT'S NEW?

2018 was the year in which I professionalised my practice and graduated from the Newlyn School of Art committing to landscape in an intuitive, abstract and expressionist style.

In 2019 I consolidated that with my '*Gara: Connected Forms*' exhibition and work, celebrating both my chosen approach and my subject inspiration - the provincial Philippines.

2020 has become a year of even deeper immersion in instinctive working with and in the landscape, using more expressive forms of media to increase the directness and immediacy of my response, and trusting more in my own method and judgement to create and make work.



*An example of my working practice : from left to right*

*Working in my concertina sketchbook out on my local heath (where there's a very convenient concrete slab for resting and painting by a secluded path) : the 'first response' sketch close up completed outside : to a finished painting; one in a series of 5 called 'The Day the Humpback Died'.*

**Inspiration** - I have finally found a way to combine my sources and inspiration into a coherent work stream that is both loose enough to excite and surprise me, and coherent enough to be purposive.

I remain fascinated by the link between the land, our sense of belonging and wellbeing, and our identity. So, what I continue to paint and work with is landscape – the meaning and significance we give to the physical environment beyond its features. It is a place I escape to.

Late last year someone challenged me with (rather dismissively I think) her view that 'landscape' was a shared space so how could I suggest I went there to escape? I didn't have an immediate response other than a feeling she was wrong. I know now she was.

From my perspective landscape is completely personal. It's what we carry in our heads and though elements are shared the complete picture is only perceived by the individual and consequently unique. That is where I escape to and what I mean when I say I paint landscape – into my own ideas, imagination and memory.

## **Roots**

And this year that 'escape' has been about 'home' – or at least the British Isles - and will remain so. This is all about roots and where I am from, starting from my home in Surrey and moving out to places I find or remember as significant.



*Small intuitive outdoor sketch : earth, watercolour and charcoal*

I walk in my local woods and on the heathlands almost every day. Those kind of personal, regular but small connections are important to me.

I find the act of walking and feeling the landscape leads me to narratives. Fragmented, random and lyrical they just pop into my head. I cannot make sense of them in isolation but as a collective I have found threads that, when I research them later, relate back to origins lost in prehistory, to deep animist belief appropriated by early Christianity. I love this. 'Big stuff' I call it. It makes me sit up and take notice.

My hypothesis at the start of this project was that, unlike some other cultures, we have lost the indigenous connection to these deep environment-based traditions. I have discovered we have not. They are just so deeply buried in a collective memory that we have forgotten we ever knew them, or where they originated. We can only speculate about them from disparate and incomplete evidence but there is enough to suggest they were appropriated into centuries of Christian practice and altered to fit new ways of thinking and seeing.

Of all the drivers of that change it is the written word that has been the most important shaping and fixing our ideas of self. I always felt words had a place in my art. Now I know why.

So my writing is becoming an important link between experience and painting, with the lines I write often appearing as marks in my finished images.

## ***Words and images***

To date I've made three series of paintings using this approach, each consisting of one large and four medium sized works. Each had a different starting point.

The first series '*Amphibalus and the Head of Alban*' emerged from my research, and a story originating in landscape which may or may not have been an example of a local pagan spirit or minor deity being rebranded as a Christian saint, in fact the first English martyr – St. Alban. The story is also attached to a date which has a specific significance for me, my birthday. I used words from Bede's '*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*' written about 730AD to underpin some of the works.



*'The Transformation'* ; watercolour, acrylic, charcoal and pencil on paper

(56cm x 76cm : Saunders Waterford 100% cotton rag 300gsm)

The second series '*The Day the Humpback Died*', part of which is shown on page 2, was inspired by a video I'd made of a fallen tree in the woods and my sketches of it. When it was wet – which it often was - it had reminded me of a whale moving through the waves. I documented that thought on the same day the news reported the discovery of a dead humpback in the Thames. The next day the tree had been cut up and removed (after blocking the path for the previous eight months). A series of odd coincidences. But this is how legends and myths get made.

And the third is a series inspired by walks along a tow path and a poem I made up about it – '*The Ballad of Edward Baker*'.

So I will continue to make these narratives and series and to explore how and where I might show them later in the year. Next up is a series that are called '*Three Walks in a Winter Wood*' – memories of encounters with deer recorded in a string of poems I wrote a few years ago.

I look forward to writing and updating you on progress in my next newsletter in September. Until then please stay safe and well.

Follow me on Instagram @simonbirdart, on Twitter @simonbirdartist and on my website find out a bit more of my motivations and process <https://www.simonbirdart.com/about>

I find an element of my subject to focus on in each picture but also like the way one informs the subsequent. In the 'Ballad' series shapes and the hiding and revealing of words hint at hidden secrets.



*The 5 works that make up the mini-series 'Ballad of Edward Baker' drying out on a rug in my study. And (below) detail from the smaller variants. All watercolour and mixed media on paper*

*(300gsm rough Saunders Waterford)*

