

It's like... you know...

A conversation about painting: Julie Saul and Julie Mayer, 21st November 2024.

JM *We are talking about the new paintings that you're going to be showing at The Birley in December and about how much process drives your work.*

JS Yes, I feel like the paintings have to go through a lot before they are finished. I start them, go over it, ruin it, bring it back, ruin it again – it feels like it has to go through a big journey. The painting has to be worked at really hard, it's dragged backwards and forwards by layering, hiding things and letting some things show, scratching into it, working things out. It's like a problem, a problem-solving process. You do something and then you have to solve that problem.

There's a classic saying, 'like you're having a conversation with the paint'; its exactly that, isn't it?

Yes, definitely, and since I've had my own studio I do actually speak to them like people do to their plants (*laughs*). If I'm working on a smallish piece, I'll carry it around the house and put it in the kitchen. I'm looking at it while I'm making stuff; I carry it around to see what it needs next.

So you are always thinking about painting?

Yes, constantly. It's very boring isn't it (*laughs*).

No, no (laughs), its because you see in painting, you see in shape and colour. Even though you're not in the studio 24/7, you are in your head aren't you?

Yeah, yes.

It's a lot to do with process isn't it, your work? Recently you have been using a new painting technique; you've been adding, spraying and wiping paint off and on your canvases.

Yes, I'm trying to remember how that happened. At some point, you have a blank canvas and you don't know what to do. I wrote a word in chalk on it and then wiped a bit off and it just reminded me... like when you have a memory that fades. It was a word about somebody and, you know, it fades to a memory.

Painting as memory was one of the things I was going to ask you about, and also colour as memory. Do you have a bank of colour memories?

Sometimes I meet someone and I think they're a colour.

Like synesthesia?

I've never thought about it like that: not everybody, but some people will remind me, or they'll say something or they wear something that will take me to a colour.

Colours seem to have changed in your more recent paintings compared to the ones you were doing a couple of years ago.

At one time I used to use colours straight out of the tube, but now I've started mixing say, a little pink in with a bit of green; they are more muted now.

With this new palette, I think your paintings are more 'open' than they were; I think there is less line.

I've started using Unison pastels to draw my line. They're really rich and you can't rub them away, not totally. Some pastels will leave a chalky, milky line, but these ones don't, they're really strong and I like that. Recently – sounds silly, but it's not silly because I know other artists have done it – I'll put myself in an awkward position to make a mark.

What, you mean bodily?

Yes, and I also put the painting in an awkward place to reach. I like the kinds of marks this can make, because it's more... it's not a controlled mark. I was listening to a thing with Fiona Rae, someone was interviewing her and she said she'll 'creep up to the painting and do a cheeky little mark'. And I thought, I know exactly what she means by that because I've done it myself. I love the brush and I know I'm going to do a big mark, but sometimes... With the Unison pastels, I've sometimes done marks like that and at the same time I'll put it in my left hand and do it, or shut my eyes and walk along the painting.

It's like when a painting or something you've done surprises you.

Yes, it's a mark that sort of says... like a little accident – it's like a drip sometimes... Everybody that likes paint, likes a drip and it's about liking that drip and leaving it.

You use acrylic paints, don't you? What's your favourite brand?

Different makes have different colours. At the moment I have about five or six tubes of Burnt Sienna and they're all different. Every make is a different shade, completely different, and the one I like is a Winsor & Newton. I've got the Pip Seymour, the really expensive one, but I still prefer the Winsor & Newton in that colour: it's not about the make necessarily, but more about the actual colour.

I would never describe your paintings as thickly painted, though they are very layered and in that respect they're thick.

More recently I'm using a lot of washes and the more opaque marks will be the pastel. The washes go like that (*gestures in a wide arc*) and the pastel goes like that (*gestures a line*).

So those two things are working together. First you do a wash and then you add the pastel. The pastel says something to the wash, and then the wash will say something to the pastel.

Yes, and then I'll fix it or sometimes go over it. I have to be really careful with the pastels. They are very rich and you can wet them with water and use it like a watery wash. They're very good. For example, with the orange, you really have to scrub your hands to get it off, they are that strong.

How do you start a painting? Do you lay down a colour all over to start with? Do you have particular way to start or not?

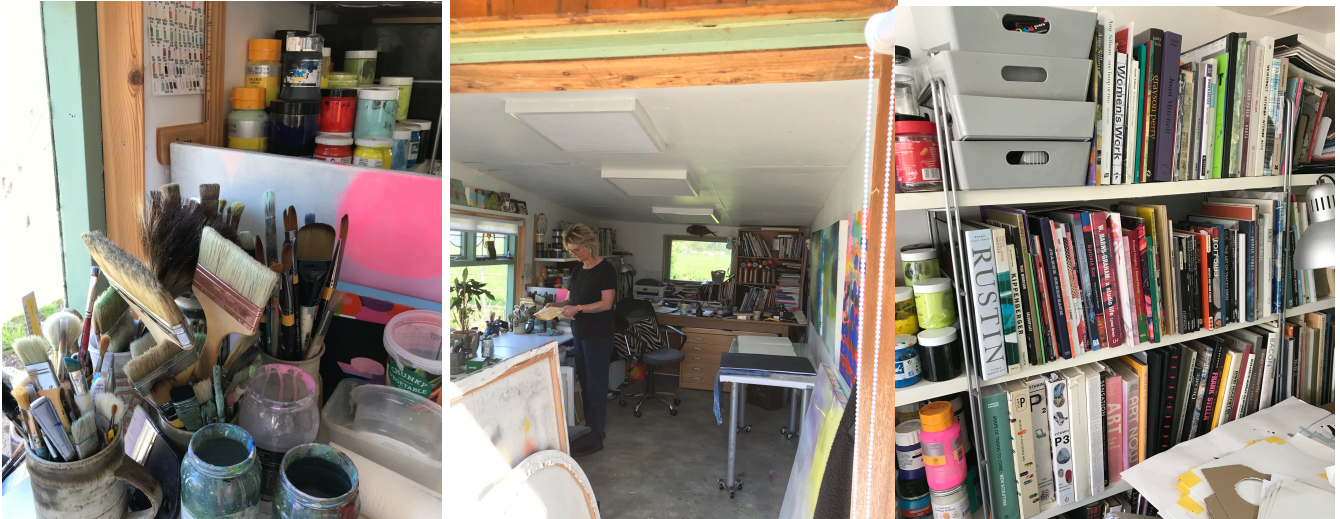
Sometimes I'll get a pastel and write a word or a letter then scrub it out. It might be just a very little insignificant mark that you will never see, but it just starts me off. Or just a thought.

You physically write it?

Yeah, or a bit of it – it's not even legible. It's not meant to be.

I suppose to me, that would be awful if someone saw that stage; it seems like a very private start.

Yes it is. And yeah I wouldn't like it, but even if you did see it you probably wouldn't be able to read it. Even when I look at it, I can't really read it. It's not about writing a word, it's more about the mark.



You are working from a studio at home at the moment. When do you get to the studio and what's a typical studio day?

Mornings usually. I take a drink to the studio and I start tidying up, getting brushes out and certain pots and jars ready. I also find myself putting some away that should have been tidied away the day before. I lay everything ready and tend to start with a warm-up in my sketchbook. And I like doing the sketchbook, sometimes more than a canvas, because its mine and I'm not showing it to anyone. It's like a rehearsal.

So, its like the sketchbooks are your private journals and the paintings are put out there for people to engage with?



Yes. Sometimes though, you put down a mark and you like it, so you do two more and it actually spoils the first mark.

Sometimes I'll just do a mark in the sketchbook and leave it. Where as on a canvas, I would overwork it and think, 'I've done too much, I should have left the one sweep, because I liked the sweep'. And then I think 'I've just lost that now'.

We've talked about your work being linked to memory, but it also contains within itself a painting's memory, memory of painting. I see in your work a definite language that keeps reoccurring.

Yes, yes sure, certain marks always keep coming up, they do.

Do you listen to music or podcasts whilst you're painting?

Sometimes I listen to a podcast. I've tried listening to plays, but I end up putting things in the play into my painting. I like listening to other people talking about paint and how they feel about paint. Music? No, because I end up going to the beat. If I listen to classical music I get too emotional, I feel it and I don't want to do that. I do like quietness, which I've only had in this studio. I think when you share a studio, there is always an anxiety, are you being too noisy or...

Well, you are always aware of other people, aren't you? You've been in shared open studios before haven't you?

Yes, but when I'm on my own I can just be 'on my own'. It's very quiet up there. There's no sound, you can't hear cars or anything.

How often do you get to the studio?

Every day. Every day I do something and I have to. Even if its only to go and do a little thing. I need to go in there, its like an addiction. In winter, if I don't go to the studio because it's too cold, I have a large unit in my bedroom that I can use instead. I've got a spot light, watercolours, and an open book that I work on. It doesn't need a lot of time, it can be just a wash: its more important that you've actually done something. It's good for your mind. When you feel like you've not achieved anything that day, if you've done one wash, you've done something.

