

Life's a beach

Colin Willey regularly revisits the same locations.

Tim Saunders explains why.

For Dorchester-based oil painter Colin Willey, how the light falls on a Dorset landscape is as important as the setting itself. He regularly revisits the same locations at different times of day and in varying weathers to capture significant changes.

Experience dictates that certain views are best at sunset, particular times of day or year. Searching out inspiring light can sometimes be a challenge but when Colin sees something that fires him up, he cannot start painting quickly enough. As Monet said, 'Nature won't be summoned to order and won't be kept waiting. It must be caught, well caught.'

Colin's paintings follow in the English landscape tradition of Constable and Turner and he feels a particular connection to Constable. 'I love the freshness of the small outdoor studies that Constable painted. It is easy to forget that what Constable was doing was new and innovative and largely unappreciated in his own lifetime. Like Constable I often paint close to my home and in the places that have an emotional significance to me. I have lived and painted in the county for fifteen years now and feel very much at home here.'

Colin grew up in Uxbridge and met his wife Amanda at Cheltenham College of Art. They then both pursued teacher training and this was when Colin realised that he wanted to paint for the rest of his life. It was when Amanda secured a job as an art teacher at the Thomas Hardy School, Dorchester, in 1997 that the couple moved to the area and this provided the

foundation for Colin to become a professional artist. 'It wasn't easy in the early days but I stuck with it and worked hard. Now I feel very lucky to be able to say that I make a living doing what I love.'

Another artist with whom Colin feels a connection is Dorset landscape painter Frederick Whitehead. 'I like this link with the past and the idea that all those years ago he was travelling around the Dorset countryside in his caravan, painting similar views to the ones I am painting now.' Invariably the beaches at Charmouth, Studland and Portland capture Colin's attention because of the light, and they are where Colin will often paint big dramatic skies and billowing clouds. Most recently Lulworth Cove has provided a great source for much of Colin's inspiration. He is particularly drawn to Stair Hole, alongside the Cove, which Whitehead also painted (his example hangs in Dorset County Museum, Dorchester). 'I love the twists and folds in the rocks and how the sea moves around and crashes against them. I will often choose to paint at Lulworth when the sky is clear so that the light remains constant but with enough of a breeze to give me the white water against the rocks.'

Thriving on painting outdoors, Colin tackles the whole scenario like a major expedition. Just getting out of the front door is enough of a challenge, owing to the paraphernalia required: boxes of paints and the all-important easel, together with enough food and drink to keep his spirits high. 'Transporting wet paintings is always a challenge and I often use the cleverly designed Pochade box, with its hinged lid that acts as an easel and holds a painting board, to make travelling around and painting easier.'

Once at his chosen location, Colin has a whole new set of challenges to endure, mainly from the elements but also from intrigued passers-by. While the wind vigorously shakes his board, a walker might engage in conversation but Colin finds this invigorating rather than frustrating and a potentially useful way of selling work.

'The elements dictate that I have to finish a painting quickly depending on conditions,' says Colin. 'The environment is forever changing, unlike the reliable comfort of the studio. For me it's about the uncertain nature and the risk of plein air painting that makes it so worthwhile. I expect things to change – you're searching for something rather than just painting a picture. Discovering new things is so exciting.'

Colin in action at Lulworth Cove

