

Claire Wiltsher

Caroline Saunders talks to a New Forest artist whose evocative land and seascapes capture a sense of place

Claire Wiltsher describes her style as 'Turner meets Pollock' due to the play of light and the application of paint. She likes to drip paint and flick it with her fingers and brushes. 'It is important to get most of the flicks of paint to fit naturally with the place or object I am trying to communicate. My work focuses on energy and movement. It is my intention to show different weather conditions and dramatic changes in light, affecting the mood of the land and sea. Over time my focus and style have changed considerably. I find it necessary to let changes happen, as long as it feels positive. Over the years I think I have moved closer to expressing the character and atmosphere connected to a place and moment.'

Claire taught art for 15 years but now paints full time. Being a finalist in many competitions has helped to launch her work into the public domain. 'They have been a useful and positive experience but they can be an expensive and time-consuming exercise – some organisations charge high fees for each submission. Exhibiting with a good gallery is paramount, especially if they respect the integrity of the artist, and work is more likely to sell if you have a good relationship with them.'

Influences

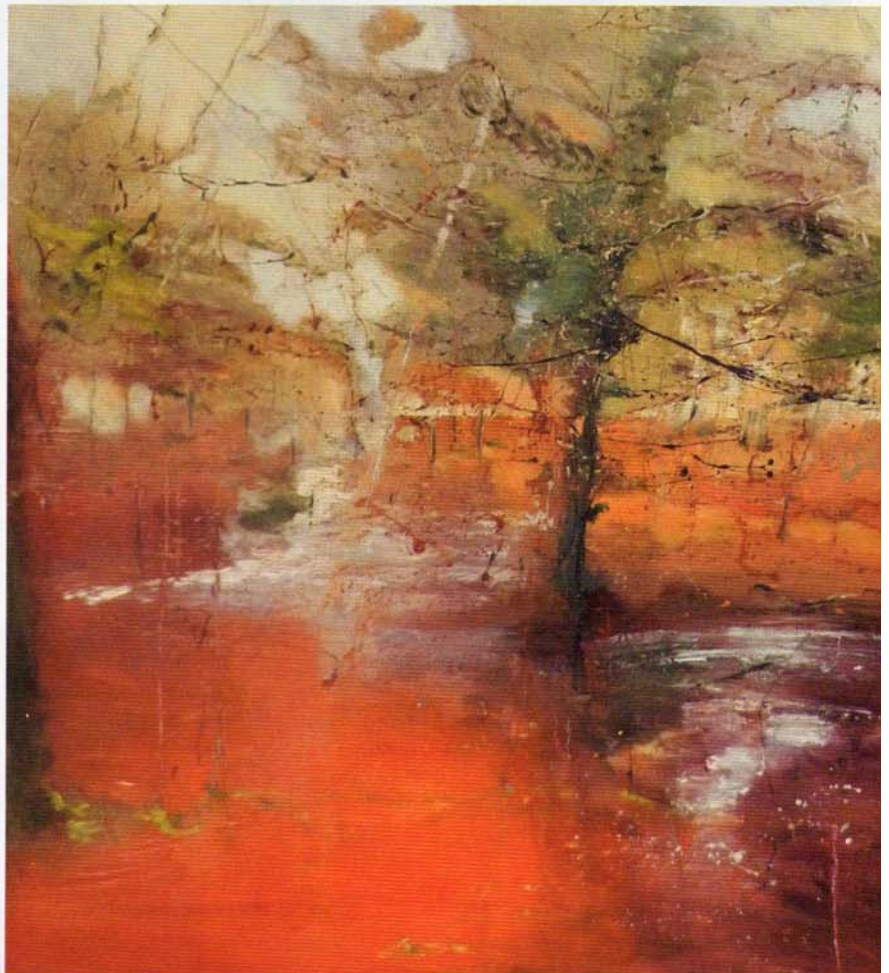
'Turner has always been a big influence. His use of light is magical. His seascapes reflect a profound understanding of how to use colour in a subtle way, building up layers to create depth and space. His painting *Peace – Burial at Sea* is one of my favourites; it's a moving painting.' Claire also admires the rich tapestry of colour in Therese Oulton's early abstract landscapes, and more remote artists like painter and printmaker James Lavadour, who explores native identity through landscape. She also likes the way Kurt



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Jackson explores distinctive characteristics from location. 'His confident personal observations evoke a calm, spiritual and warm relationship with the landscape.'

The outdoors, walking and travelling are her main inspirations. 'I cycle a lot; I find it important to travel through the landscape as well as sit and watch. I was born in a caravan so the gypsy travelling element has been integral to my life.' A few years ago she decided to embark on a personal adventure. Leaving her job and house, Claire embarked on a series of journeys, travelling to various corners of the world. Sketches, notes and photos gathered along the way, together with the culmination of thoughts and feelings



► **Tree Struck**, oil and mixed media, 31½×3½in (80×80cm).

'This ambiguous painting records a moment in the forest. The tree was full of character and energy.'



▲ **Giants**, oil and mixed media, 31½×3½in (80×80cm).

This piece was developed from a trip to Chile (Patagonia). The mountains are overwhelming and massive.'

formed the foundation of her work. In 2009 Claire moved to Lyndhurst, Hampshire and laid down her roots. This has led to a new body of work focusing on the New Forest and the Dorset coastline. Her paintings are based on a keen observation of nature. She spends much of her time making quick sketches on location and taking photographs, choosing to develop her work back in the studio. Claire combines aspects of reality with partly ambiguous elements, leaving some of the picture to the imagination. She feels that 'total recognition inhibits the imagination'.

Poems have become integral to her work and more recently have been exhibited with her paintings. Claire's passion for poetry has often provided her with titles for her paintings. She has been

writing poetry for over 30 years. 'My old sketchbooks have drawings from location with lots of scribbled notes and bits of poems scrawled over the pages.'

Working process

Combining layers of oil paint with fragments of collage, Claire creates highly textured paintings. She uses Winsor & Newton oil colour but sometimes buys a more expensive brand with colours that are difficult to mix up. 'I use a lot of flat hog hair brushes between one and ten centimetres in brush length.' Claire uses a palette that covers the whole length of a table. 'I start by mixing up the colours and tonal values. I prefer to mix more than I need so that when painting I don't have to go back to mixing, but inevitably it happens. I use Liquin to thin the oil paint a little whilst retaining its opacity, otherwise it would take months to dry. To create depth I mix bees wax in parts of the picture.' Claire uses brushmarks to build up a painting and construct a composition. She states 'different painted marks can create different spaces.'

Mapping out shapes and forms with a small brush, she analyses the tonal contrast as the work progresses. Then using masking tape Claire separates different sections of the picture in order to work out all the different layers. Artistic licence comes into play as she recreates a place by fusing bits of collage into the painting to create layers. A box of torn up coloured papers and tissue comes in handy for collage. Palette knives, rags, and sponges are used to mix and blend different layers in the work. When the work is nearly dry Claire glazes it with a thin layer of Liquin.

It usually takes Claire one day to achieve most of a painting, even if it is large, and she completes the whole painting in about three sessions. She finds listening to loud background music while painting allows the energy and movement of the music to come through in her work. 'Anything from classical, blues and jazz, through to drum and bass or soul. Most of a picture will be completed *alla prima*, which helps to keep the painting fresh and alive. 'In the second and third

sessions I build up more layers of paint and collage and scratch through areas of a painting with drawing implements: charcoal and pencil and, less frequently, pastel to allow new marks and colours from underneath to emerge.'

Sometimes Claire integrates mono-printing into the painting. 'Mono-printing is particularly useful in terms of building up different layers of texture. It can often create a more natural effect and works well with hinting at form, especially trees.' Claire presses a sheet of cellophane over a chosen section of the painting and then is able to repeat the impression on an alternative part. She bases it on trial and error, so it does not always work.

'I turn pictures upside down to see how the weight balances out, often making subtle changes as a result of this. If a painting goes wrong I often merge the whole painting and then start reworking, building back into the picture. Two to three paintings are often worked on at the same time. Claire finds dealing with different problems within several paintings helps her to be objective about changes that need to be made, as well as continue to work instinctively. Claire generally likes to leave the work unframed. She uses box canvases – a majority of which are square, which she feels is important in creating balance and harmony.

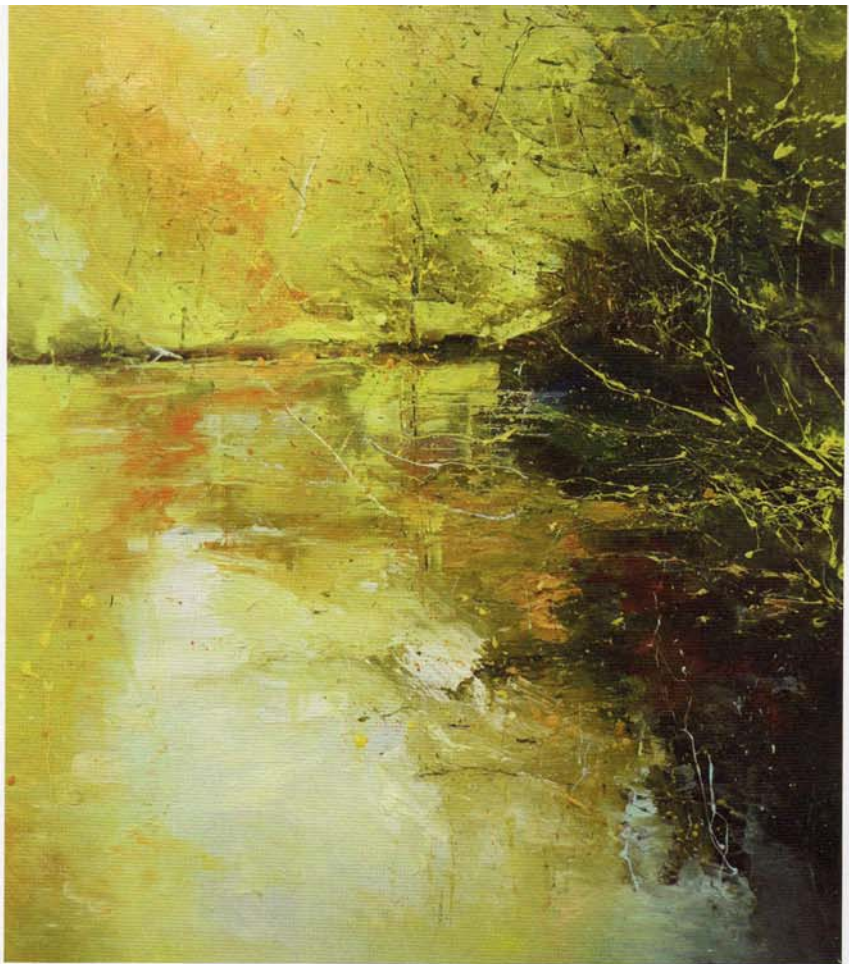
As for the future, Claire wants to continue travelling, thus documenting journeys, as well as striving to push boundaries with her refreshing interpretation of nature.

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Claire Wiltsher

studied Fine Art at Lancashire and Northumbria Universities. In 1988 she was a finalist in the Readers Digest young illustrators' competition and has since shown with galleries throughout the UK. Her work is held in many private collections, two of her paintings have been acquired for the House of Lords permanent collection and her work was exhibited at the Olympia International Fair. Claire won the Rosemary & Co Award at the Society of Women Artists' annual exhibition and was selected for the Royal Society of Marine Artists exhibition at the Mall Galleries.

Claire's work can be seen at Store Street Gallery, London WC1; Coastal Gallery, Lymington, Hampshire; Bell Fine Art, Winchester; Lyndhurst Gallery, Hampshire, and Bath Contemporary, Somerset. In 2014 Claire has a solo exhibition with Artwave West, Morcombelake, Dorset, and will be showing with Hampshire Open Studios in August. www.clairewiltsher.com.



▲ *River Watch*, oil and mixed media, 28½×23½in (72×60cm). 'Spotted while cycling in the forest, this is a personal observation of an effect of light.'

▼ *Sea Garden*, oil and mixed media, 31½×3½in (80×80cm).

'This painting was influenced by the rich green tones in Cornish seascapes when the sun hits the surface of the water. I used a combination of cobalt blue with lemon yellow and burnt sienna with zinc white to create different tonal qualities.'

