

Seeing the light

Arundel-based landscape painter Frances Knight started working en plein air 15 years ago. Now her art and her lifelong relationship with Transcendental Meditation inform one another, as JENNY MARK-BELL discovers

ENTERING Frances Knight's top floor studio in Arundel's Victoria Institute is to be confronted with a profusion of colour. In the centre of the room are the accoutrements of her art: tubes of vivid pigment jostling for space with palettes and brushes. And then the paintings on the walls: pearly seascapes in shades of slate and oyster; studies of Provence scenes in emerald and lapis; swathes of brilliant yellow representing the brief bloom of rapeseed.

Frances was born in London and went to the Camberwell School of Art. After a visit to India in her third year she won a Commonwealth and British Council Scholarship to do her postgraduate studies there. She had started Transcendental Meditation (TM) in her first year of art school: "One of my teachers went on the course with the Beatles and that's how I got into it, and then we met Maharishi when he came to England and that decided me that this was something I really wanted to teach and share with other people."

After teaching TM alongside her studies in India she became more and more involved

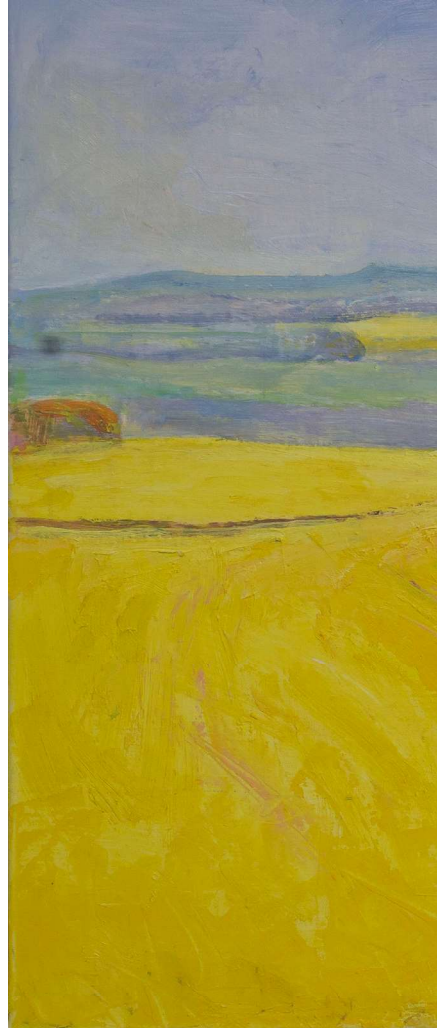
in the movement, going on to work full-time for their international headquarters.

She still teaches Transcendental Meditation courses in Arundel, with a free introductory session running every month, although she has more time to dedicate to her painting now she is no longer working for the movement full-time.

Although Frances never stopped painting, it was 15 years ago that she really discovered her style, when she began painting en plein air.

"Colour and light are very important to me, especially light, and particularly light reflected in water," she says. "I'm also really interested in the borderline between pure abstraction and something that you see. The relationship between a two-dimensional painted surface and what we think of as a landscape – an illusion of space and objects in space."

Acknowledging that there is a crossover between the two disciplines, Frances characterises TM as "not a philosophy or a lifestyle, and it's different from many meditation techniques because it doesn't require concentration or control. It's a



Above: *Yellow Fields Morning Rainstorm*

Left: Frances Knight outside the Victoria Institute in Arundel, where she has her studio



simple technique to allow the mind to settle down to that pure, creative way of thinking that everyone has within them.

“I want to express what I experience when I do my meditation and what I experience in nature when I’m in the landscape. Deep within everyone there’s that level of peace and silence and it’s something which underlies all of creation. It’s there everywhere, it’s just that normally we don’t see it.”

She believes that there is a meditative quality to the way she works too. “When I am focusing deeply on the landscape there is something very deeply nourishing. In order to get the colours right you have to focus very deeply and I think that is almost a technique in itself. I think the fact that I do TM makes it easier to operate on a deeper level of consciousness and that makes the creative intelligence more accessible. It’s a habit of thinking.”

After working for the movement in the US and India, she settled in Holland before moving to West Sussex in 2010. She knew the landscape well already – her family had a cottage at Itchenor and she grew up sailing on Chichester Harbour, while her brother has a house at South Stoke. “I love the South Downs and I’ve always been attracted to this area,” she says.

“I love the abstract structures and the lines of the fields. As clouds pass over you get these dark and light shapes. Again it’s that dialogue between abstraction and realism

“Deep within everyone there’s that level of peace and silence which underlies all of creation”

that I see in the landscape. There is one place I keep going to and I have painted many times, near The Black Rabbit in Arundel. I go there often and paint it at different times of day. I particularly like to get there very early, so I can be set up when the sun’s rising. It’s amazing how every single day it’s completely different. With the Arun the water level changes not just with the seasons, but it’s also tidal so you’ve got high tide and low tide.”

Conceding that her car has become a sort of mobile studio, Frances says that she works quickly by necessity – explaining that if she hasn’t finished a painting within two hours then she may as well start another. “Most artists have quite a logical process but I work quite spontaneously and intuitively. I start off with a viewfinder and once I’ve decided what’s working as a composition I’ll just get straight into it with the paint. I start with the underlying structure – a painting is never going to work if it doesn’t have a strong structure – so I start with putting in the big shapes.”

If a painting doesn’t work out, she will use it as a study for a larger painting done in the studio from memory. These large works take much longer – weeks or months – and give more scope for texture as the paint can be built up in layers.

The building that houses her studio is due for renovation and conversion into a centre for the community and she wants to make the most of the time she has there by doing more large studio work. “I want to record the landscape and for people to value it and how precious it is. It’s such a gift to have that beautiful landscape and I hope that my paintings will inspire people to care for the environment more.”

Frances’ previous exhibitions have included the Nigel Rose Gallery, Brighton; Project Gallery on Arundel High Street and The Little Art Gallery in West Wittering. She will be at the Surrey Art Fair in February and has a solo show in West Wittering in May, while her big summer exhibition is the Arundel Gallery Trail in August.

For now, though, there are always landscapes to paint – even at this time of year, when fingerless gloves, a stout coat and lots of layers are essential pieces of kit.

“When the leaves are gone you get lots of very interesting, subtle colours,” she says. “It’s almost harder to paint when everything is very bright green. Because the sun is lower in the sky you have more contrast and you can get some beautiful light effects.

“But there’s always something beautiful to paint at every time of year.” ♦

Check Frances’ website for details of open studios, painting classes and upcoming exhibitions francesknight.com