A neglected art? Painting’s alive

Contemporary art is often about ideas, installations and performance. A new exhibition has opened, looking to celebrate the art of East Anglian painters. Arts Editor ANDREW CLARKE spoke to the five artists looking to change the landscape.

A startling exhibition celebrating the range and diversity of contemporary East Anglian art has been unveiled at the Ipswich Art School Gallery this weekend.

Five leading artists have pooled their resources to provide a snapshot of East Anglian art in 2012. It’s an exhibition which also celebrates the forgotten art of painting. This is something to be applauded. Much contemporary art is conceptual and frequently realised as a 3-D object.

The art of painting has been somewhat neglected and these five leading practitioners are determined to put painting back in the frame.

The artists taking part in the exhibition all live and work in East Anglia. In the show are Robert Priseman, Barbara Howey, Nicholas Middleton, Susan Gunn and Simon Carter.

The work ranges from the shockingly direct, as evidenced by Robert Priseman’s stark portrait of an electric chair, to Barbara Howey’s colourful evocations of home, to Nicholas Middleton’s photo-real portraits of life moving on, which contrast sharply with Simon Carter’s abstract landscapes. Everything is then balanced by Susan Gunn’s serene geometrically-perfect compositions.

It’s an eclectic show which benefits from the decision to hang the work in such a way that no one artist is allowed to dominate a room.

In each room the viewer is provided with a contrast. There is a lead artist but on one wall there is a lone work by another painter designed to complement the other pictures but also to offer an alternative view of modern painting.

The artists describe the exhibition as being a mute discussion between themselves – a discussion that is given voice in a book, New East Anglian Painting, which accompanies the show and transcribes conversations between the artists about their work, carried out over the previous 12 months.

East Anglia has a long and rich tradition of painting. It is rightly acknowledged as the birthplace of John Constable and Thomas Gainsborough, who both captured the beauty of the landscape, and in recent decades has provided a home for numerous significant artists, such as Maggi Hambling, Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud.

Simon Carter describes painting as a work in progress. It is an art form that continues to evolve.

It has moved over the centuries from cave paintings to John Constable landscapes to today’s diverse array of abstract and figurative work, which embraces a broad spectrum of different media and techniques.

Robert Priseman was the person who initiated the contact between the different artists and suggested they should pool their resources to make a statement about modern painting.

“I really love painting and wanted to champion painting and I felt that, over the last 20 years, painting has been rather sidelined and yet there are so many people who want to see painting, so many new artists coming through who want to do painting, and I thought ‘Why don’t we get together some of the newest, brightest and best of the current generation of artists – those who love painting and are from this region – and put on a contemporary exhibition?’ I thought it would be really exciting.”

He said there was really only one venue: the Ipswich Art School Gallery – the place that had inspired so many great painters over the years.

The exhibition was also given an international flavour because Robert wanted artists who had exhibited across the globe.

“I wasn’t so interested in paintings of East Anglia, although we have plenty of those. I wanted paintings from artists who lived and worked in East Anglia and were exhibiting internationally.”

Barbara Howey fitted the bill perfectly because she has had solo exhibitions in New York and Tokyo, while Susan Gunn had been awarded The European Sovereign Painters prize, Nicholas Middleton had won the John Moore Prize and had exhibited in San Francisco, and Simon Carter had recently had a show in Canada.

“When you take a step back and look at that, you realise that these are artists of some significance and they are working here. So to be able to put together an exhibition in Ipswich using people like that is a really exciting thing.”

He said the sense of continuity to be found in painting was really important.

“There are lots of different forms of expression. You look at photography that goes back 150 years. The written word is 4,000 years old, but, if you look at painting, it goes back 30-40,000 years and it has been continually re-invented throughout that time.”

Installation attracts attention because it is a new medium. The very fact it is new draws a crowd and as a result it is easier to create an impact.

“Painting is different because you have the whole weight of history behind you. When you create an installation you only have your peer group that you will be compared with.”

“If you are a painter then you have got to be prepared to be compared with all the great artists who have gone before you. When you create an installation you only have your peer group that you will be compared with.”

He added that the pressure was exacerbated by the fact it took many years of constant practice to become good enough to face that sort of comparison in the first place.

“It’s a very big ask to become a painter. It takes a long time to develop that craft and to discover what it is you want to say and how best to say it.”

Robert had detected a move away from electronic imagery.
and well in the hands of this five

Robert has created a series of five delicate landscapes which are surrounded by elaborate frames. These frames resemble windows, as if the viewer is looking out onto a scene but is somehow shielded from the harsh elements or from the full horror contained within what appear to be tranquil locales.

These small landscapes record the places where the bodies of the Ipswich prostitutes were discovered.

He said: “What I wanted to do was reclaim these places from the horrifying events that they had become associated with. I wanted them to be viewed as ordinary but beautiful places within Suffolk again.”

Susan said this highlighted the fact that our perceptions of paintings change over time. What they have to say changes; not only as time changes but as we change and bring different life experiences to the pictures we view.

“It’s a conversation that changes over the weeks, years and decades, We all try to say something about the world in which we live but also reveal the concerns and pre-occupations of our creators.”

Barbara Howey’s work combines both the important traits of painting – intensely personal dialogue and this sense of time passing.

Her work combines images of places where she has lived with watercolour washes, so images look as if they are emerging from the mists of time or have been captured at dawn as the sky is filled with multi-coloured reflected light. She explained that she researches the locations on the web and sometimes discovers that the houses she lived in are no longer standing and have been replaced with new buildings. In those circumstances she substitutes the modern image for the house as it was.

Susan Gunn explores the world of gesso – it involves many layers of paint, chalk or pigment, built up and combined with rabbit skin glue on canvas. Up to 20 layers of paint are applied as the gesso dries. Susan then adds extra interest as she engineers the surface to crack and fissure, providing a network of lines which add texture.

Susan’s work has a sense of calm and tranquillity as she places shapes in harmonious geometric patterns, while Simon Carter records the landscape and details from the modern image for the house as it was.

His paintings invite the viewer to apply their own interpretation of the views on display.

As part of the exhibition the five East Anglian artists have invited the Ipswich Art Society to stage their own painting exhibition, which will run alongside the main show. The members’ work will be refreshed on a monthly basis during the run of the show.

■ The New East Anglian Painters Exhibition runs until May 4, 2013, from Tuesday to Sunday and from 10am to 5pm.

"I had an exhibition in London in January and a group of Italian designers came to see it and they spoke to me afterwards and were delighted that they had had the opportunity to see something real."

"I think the problem is that so many images are just displayed on computer screens these days and people miss not having something real, something tangible, to look at."

"What people sometimes forget is that when you paint in great globules or as translucent watercolours. It all adds to your perception of the picture and how you relate to it. It is all part of the dialogue it has with its audience."

The New East Anglian Painting exhibition is all about dialogue. The pictures not only relate to and contrast with one another, they seek to speak to visitors to the gallery.

They all try to say something about the world in which we live but also reveal the concerns and pre-occupations of their creators.

"What people sometimes forget about painting is that you are not painting a literal copy of the scene in front of you – you are painting your emotional reactions to a scene," said Robert.

"It’s about creating a visual representation of your own response to a scene."

Robert has a created a series of paintings that deals with his and our responses to death. One of the most powerful images in the exhibition is his powerful, direct representation of an electric chair.

Illuminated by a lone spotlight, it is the only image on the wall as you enter one of the side galleries. It is shocking (that’s the only word for it) because you are unprepared to be confronted by it and it challenges you to make a response. Elsewhere

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