

# Portrait of an Artist: Gwen Hardie talks about her work and upcoming exhibition at the SCVA

Born and educated in Scotland, Gwen Hardie attended the Edinburgh College of Art from 1979-1983. She then lived and worked in London and Berlin before settling in New York City in 2000. Her work engages predominantly with figuration and the act of perception, exploring the various imaginings of the human form and our response to aspects of the body.

With works featuring at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art for the upcoming exhibition “REALITY: Modern and Contemporary British Painting”, Venue caught up with Gwen about the development of her work and its importance in relation to the overall context of painting.

**The subtlety of texture and blending of colour in your work creates a very intimate feel. Could you talk us through the process of attaining this effect?**

I try to render the membrane of oil paint as if it is an actual outer membrane of skin; in particular the semi translucent and smooth quality of it. I paint very fast, so that the film of paint comes together in one session, which can last between 2 and 6 hours. I do this to retain the integrity of the ‘film’ of paint, so that it has the subtle and seamless texture you mention.

The stretched canvas is part of the effect of skin, and has to be taut. The tondo and oval format further the idea of the body image as a complete world (rather than a small portion of skin that can be logically added to) and as an object which can be looked through.

Warm and cool colours are juxtaposed and blended to create a subtle perceptual vibration, which makes the surface seem animate/alive. The 'intimate feel' you mention comes from the sense of familiarity; the fact that your skin and mine are not so different and from this sense of being very close-up to either your own or someone else's skin.

**What appeals to you about painting as a form? What do you think it is that keeps painting relevant to this day?**

Oil painting is particularly adept in creating a three dimensional illusion. Before photography, the only way to recreate three dimensional reality on a two dimensional surface was by painting. Now, we are free to experiment, borrow from other ages and reinvent and explore whatever we want in painting.

Nevertheless, it remains amazing to me that a spatial illusion can be created by employing the use of paint ; the transformation from two to three dimensions is a kind of alchemy.

I take this aspect of painting and reinvest it with new associations. I am interested in how the human eye creates this dimensional transformation, how it differs to the lens of the camera and the resulting photograph. A painting which has been observed from life has a more fully realized physical and tangible dimension that makes it different to a painted photo realist image or a photograph.

Painting reflects the workings of the mind in a visceral and immediate way. This physicality of painting is conceptually suited to my subject of skin and light, as seen and experienced in close-up.

**In previous decades there was talk of painting being a 'dead' art form; how do you feel your work resists this claim?**

Painting is an art form which has very particular components to it which I don't think can be replicated in any other art form. The claim arose a few decades ago from a need to create a legitimacy for other art forms that embrace new media and approaches; the claim underlines the power that painting has had historically.

Now we are in a different age where many art forms share the stage and painting is just one particular art form that happens to be ideally suited to certain artists. For me, painting enables an immediacy of attention, focus and control. I like that

painting creates a still image like a time capsule that is at once physically present, tangible and yet timeless.

**How do you feel your style has developed over time? As an artist working predominantly as a figurative painter do you feel that you have been significantly influenced by other contemporary movements such as conceptualism, or even abstract expressionism?**

My passion and fascination with the human form has always been present, though I have at times experimented with aspects of abstraction, formalism and minimalism in the quest to ultimately engage with the human form in a new way. Essential to achieving this is finding a particular technique that serves my concept in oil paint. Sometimes this has been easier to explore without a recognizable subject.

Growing up in the UK gave me a healthy respect for realism, such worthy artists as Lucien Freud and Gwen John are sources of inspiration. However, I felt the intellectual need and curiosity to mix this interest in Realism with an equally strong interest in 20th Century American artists such as Rothko, Joseph Albers and James Turrell for example.

Historically, the The New York School from the 60s and 70s was intellectually liberating, legitimizing for me the idea that one could experiment with formal aspects as an end in itself, breaking the painting down to components such as format, surface, color etc.

Albers's studies of color relationships helped me to clarify the role of color/tone in perceiving depth and movement within a static image. More recently, Turrell is an artist who works with site specific light installations, creating spatial ambiguities in his work which inspire me to think about spatial illusions in painting.

Another inspiration is John Coplans, who breaks down the stereotypes of images of men in large scale photographs of portions of his own body, also magnified and decontextualized. Abstract expressionism is less of an influence, because I want colour to be in the service of creating heightened attention rather than heightened emotion. I realized this first when I studied briefly with Baselitz in Berlin.

**Your work deals significantly with the body and its identity. How do you feel this fits within the title theme of the exhibition 'REALITY'?**

The subject of the human body and the skin is universal and familiar, offering me a means to explore ideas about Realism. By Realism, I mean an intention to depict what is actually here, from my viewpoint and visible in life, as opposed to fantasy or drama.

My intention is to create a sense of heightened attention to the subject, even if that heightened attention seems to transform into ambiguity under scrutiny. One could argue that there are many levels of reality. For me the ability to see through the surface has a metaphoric dimension that alludes to the fact that life is always in movement and transition.

I draw subtle associations between the body and the landscape; the light of the sun on the earth and the moon are manifestations of the real in so far as they are natural phenomena that I can see. I am inspired by the idea of capturing a moment in time, physically and mentally as witnessed both on the body and by the human eye. Subject/object relations between artist and model also interest me. I admire the intense scrutiny that Lucien Freud and Gwen John subjected their models and themselves to. When I used to do self portraits or paint close ups of other people's faces, I found those most compelling which gave the sense of being able to look through the exterior surface of the face into an interior world, to capture the person's face in a state of openness as if the boundary between myself as the artist and the model was on some level, negligible.

Gwen John's portraits and some of Freud's are a great example of this quality. Realism garnered from direct observation also presents an opportunity to get beyond the formulaic and the preconceived; the artist partly surrenders to the subject, while observing it with great diligence.

To my mind the most powerful portraits are when the artist is able to combine their own projection of the subject (which is inevitable) with an ability to express something of the inner reality of the model.

The three paintings that I show in the REALITY exhibition each present a different area of my own body, so magnified and decontextualized that there is no sense of my own identity. Observed accurately from life, surface details and what lies just under the skin are depicted realistically, encouraging the viewer to experience a shift of perspective from one of looking at the 'other' to one of identification.

**Gwen Hardie will be attending the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts for a Masterclass Workshop on Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th October as well as an 'In Conversation' event on Thursday 9th October. For more information, see: [www.gwenhardie.com](http://www.gwenhardie.com)**

**Posted**

**21/09/2014**

**in**

**Arts, OldVenue**

**by**

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