

"I'VE ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO CREATING A PICTURE THAT TELLS A STORY AND I WANT PEOPLE TO BE ENGAGED"



Brighton-based painter Anne Magill at her easel
OPPOSITE PAGE *Stroll At First Light*, acrylic on canvas, 17x21cm



SWEET LITTLE MYSTERY

Collected by Russell Crowe, published by Jack Vettriano and photographed by Rankin – Brighton-based artist **Anne Magill** might be a woman in demand but her nostalgic paintings of figures in the landscape remain tantalisingly elusive

WORDS: STEVE PILL PHOTOGRAPHY: EMMA WOOD

On the far wall of Anne Magill's Brighton studio is a huge, unfinished canvas. Up close you see a riot of dark brush strokes, worn away and blended; all sepia and umber tones. Stand back though and figures emerge, three thick silhouettes stood on a nondescript headland, looking out across what appears to be a vast expanse of water, suggested only by specks of light that shimmer in the distance. It is a breathtaking and absorbing work that suggests so much and yet gives away so little, a truly modern masterpiece. Anne shakes her head when she looks at it though. "That picture has almost worked three times. It has taken three years and I hate it sooooo much!"

She laughs a hearty, almost embarrassed laugh. "It's nearly there. The people have changed shape and clothes and sex, actually. They started off very small, walking across a big landscape, then they got closer to this big expanse of water and now they are at the water's

edge. I know what is going in my head. It's really important that they finish this journey."

It seems that the more emotion and thought that Anne invests in to her paintings, the more elusive her subjects become. Like many former illustrators, the Irish-born artist has been yearning for something less descriptive in her work recently and her latest collection promises to be full of mystery. Opening next month at Jack Vettriano's Heartbreak gallery in London, *Journeys* collects together several dozen of her most recent works and the sense of development is acute.

Anne's paintings have often depicted lonesome figures in nostalgic, sepia-tinged settings, but whereas in the past there might have been more recognisable objects, like a bench, the bough of a ship or a vintage car, she now keeps things even more oblique; even details of clothing have all but disappeared. As she puts it, "It's almost as if I want to get the essence of a person in a painting, so you get a hazy, quite emotive image." >



By building up each image in layers and then ending with larger brushes to give a looser finish, her latest collection remains full of mystery, suggesting different stories to the viewer, yet leaving them tantalisingly open to interpretation. Anne has found herself increasingly drawn to more abstract painters and at a recent exhibition at the De La Warr Pavilion, she was particularly moved by a large Frank Auerbach canvas. "I don't know what mood I was in but it almost reduced me to tears," she recalls. "I remember it was so bold and free. He seemed unencumbered by worrying about what he was doing; you know, that pure kind of love for those big marks and dollops of paint."

This move to a more atmospheric, almost abstract finish has also coincided with a steep rise in the Irish artist's popularity. During 10 years of exhibitions at London's Medici Gallery she had built up a small, devoted following of collectors but as she readies her first exhibition at Heartbreak, her profile has been given a timely boost by a string of high-profile collaborations. The photographer Rankin took Anne's portrait for a recent Sky Arts billboard advertising campaign, while British Airways recently commissioned two widescreen landscapes for its first class lounge at New York's JFK airport. Hollywood actor Russell Crowe has also bought up a number of her works in the past and, with Vetrignano's publishing company behind her, the plan is to take her work to America soon.

"Heartbreak have all the experience of such phenomenal success with Jack and I am quite happy to ride on the back of that," she says with a smile. "They understand about using print to get more revenue and I like the fact that people can get to the work in different ways. It's almost like management and it's taking me a wee while to getting used to having a middle person. I'm used to being self-contained and sorting things out myself."

Anne was brought up in the small seaside village of Millisle, County Down. Her parents both came from farming families and they had a little house by the sea, near to her grandfather's farm. "I think that the place has had quite an influence on my work now, I'm always thinking about the land and the sea. For the new show, *Journeys*, I've been really struck by the idea of leaving somewhere and not coming back, or going to the water's edge and there being something out there."

She even attributes the development of her figures into more abstract silhouettes as a subconscious nod to the landscape and people she grew up with. "At home on the coast you will occasionally see these megaliths that had been put in to the ground to remember the sailors that had been

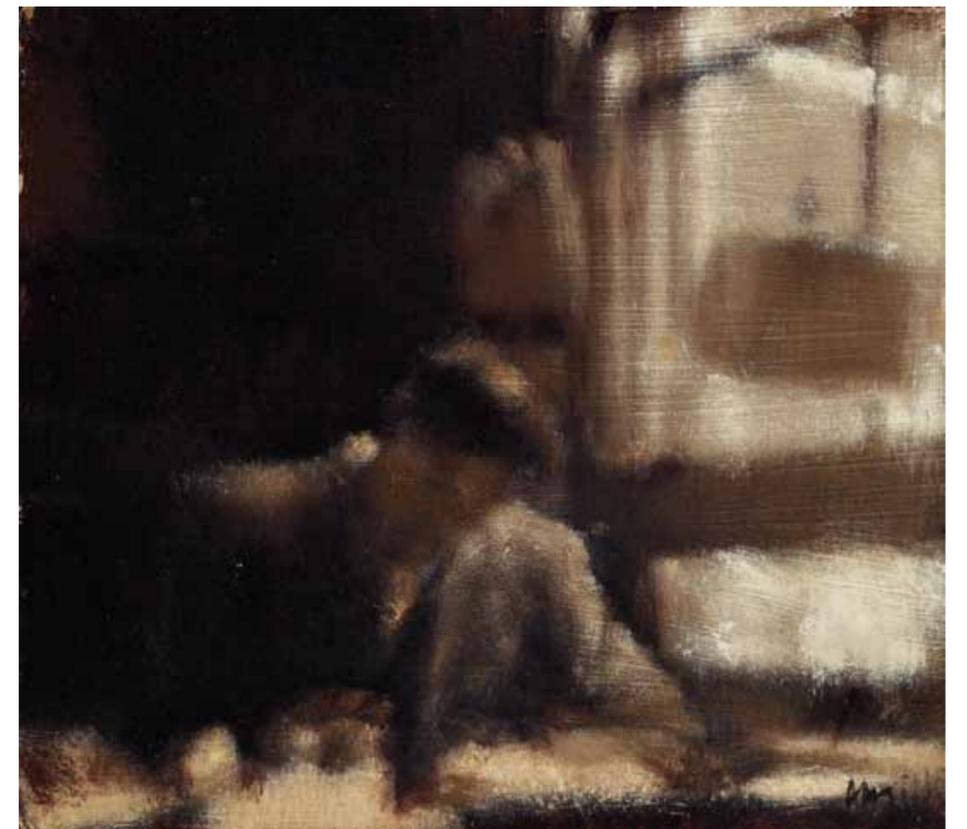
lost at sea, so you'd get this lovely headland with this hewn piece of rock that had a few basic chips out of it. Those megaliths really stuck in my mind, they were so lovely and stoic. The people I was growing up around, like my dad's brothers, they were all people of the land and they were quite stoic guys. A lot of this series does hark back to those people in your life who don't say very much but were always there."

With the art of good draughtsmanship instilled in her from an early age by her grammar school teachers, Anne left Ireland to complete her art foundation course in Liverpool. Despite having initial ambitions to study fine art, a chance visit to a friend at Central St. Martin's saw her apply for their illustration course. "I applied a lot of intellectual rigour to *that* decision," she says jokingly.

It proved an eye-opening move as she was handed big blocks of willow charcoal and giant sheets of paper on her arrival and then encouraged to "get stuck in". After years of detailed drawings, this change of medium was just the shake up she needed and to this day, many of her paintings begin with a charcoal sketch as it adds a pleasing tonal base to her works.

Anne's professional career began with stints as a court artist for the BBC and ITN. "In those days, I had bleached blonde spiky hair and I was a bit of a punk, with a very broad Irish accent (which I still have, of course)," she says. "I remember going to the high court and being sneaked in by the BBC News and when proceedings started, I just got my drawing board out. The whole thing was stopped and I ended up being threatened with being arrested for contempt of court." >

BELOW *The Letter*, acrylic on canvas, 21x23.5cm
OPPOSITE PAGE Anne prepares for her latest exhibition.
Harbour, acrylic on canvas, 18.5x18.5cm





ABOVE *Late Evening*, acrylic on canvas, 61x107cm

She also worked as a news illustrator for various newspapers and magazines, which included working during the time of the Troubles in Ireland. “I really wanted to draw and get across what I was feeling and what was in the air and I couldn’t do it. I kept coming away feeling like I hadn’t said enough. I remember thinking that I needed to sit back and use photographs, to just be stiller and let things wash over me more.”

More studio-based work followed, settling into a comfortable illustrating career that included plenty of book jackets for the likes of Helen Dunmore and Josephine Hart. It proved a formative experience, with the succession of quick deadlines helping to hone the artist’s own storytelling instinct. “I’ve always been drawn to creating a picture that tells a story and I want people to be engaged,” she says. “I’m a bit of a romantic, in the general sense of the word, and if I try and fake it, you can tell.” Instead, many of Anne’s paintings touch on a more honest, universal emotions, from an urge to connect with people, to a yearning for lost friends – something the artist refers to as “the ache”. Does she devise a particular story for each painting? “Not exactly but there is usually a relationship between the people in each painting and I sometimes have people in mind.”

Anne’s conversation stumbles at this point, as she talks in fragmented sentences about energy, dynamics and references to an “epic” event. She appears uncomfortable talking about these big ideas, though you are left unsure whether this is due to the complexity of the subjects, or simply that such a self effacing artist is reluctant to place such onus on her own work.

She is far more comfortable talking about other people, including the various characters that she works alongside. Anne rents a studio in Brighton’s Phoenix, the largest artist-led arts organisation in the South East of

England, which means she is surrounded by more than 100 other practising artists every day. Down the hall from her is a 90-year-old painter who still practises yoga and Anne is full of admiration for his work ethic. She takes an active role in the organisation too, even down to finding her name on the rota for cleaning the gents’ loo.

Anne’s paintings often hang in her studio for months on end as she imbues them with character and teases out storylines from her figures. A composition will often begin with a photograph, either one of her own or a random Victorian image collected from car boot fairs. “When people took photos at that time, they must have really loved the subject matter because it cost a lot of money. It was important for them to record it. It was so formal, they were so special to people.”

From this, she will draft out a composition in charcoal, using day-old bread as an eraser. “It’s enough to have that shape,” she says at this stage. “I’m really not interested in features and I think you can tell quite a lot about people from their body language.”

She pulls out a favourite photo that she picked up for £1.50. The person who sold her the photos explained that they were taken in New Zealand by a man who was recording his life before he left the country, never to return. It proved a perfect inspiration for her *Journeys* series. “With that history, I can do something with it.”

Anne tries to relate the photos to people she knows to create narratives, but at one boot fair in Lewisham, she picked up some photos that were all too familiar. “It actually was some of my relatives,” she says. “I thought I’d gone mad. I felt like I’d been wishing things too hard but it turns out my elderly aunt had been burgled in Ireland two weeks prior and she’d had these photos stolen. Of course, by the time I worked it out the guy had legged it, but sometimes things just come full circle.” 

ARTIST'S BIO



Name

Anne Magill

Born

County Down, Ireland, 1962

Training

Central St. Martin’s, London

Next exhibition

Journeys, Heartbreak, London W1, 10 December – 16 January 2011

More info

www.annemagill.com