

BIRDS AND BLOOMS

Artist Natalie Toplass talks to **Verity Gough** about her influences and how Shropshire's flora and fauna inspires her work

As soon as she steps outside of the front door of her picturesque Edwardian home in Jackfield near Ironbridge, Natalie Toplass is awash with inspiration for her nature-based paintings. The bucolic North Shropshire backdrop coupled with the ephemeral beauty of the changing seasons offer the perfect foil for her work.

Renowned for creating exquisite large scale close-up studies of flowers and birds, Natalie has exhibited at various prestigious galleries across the UK including the Royal Academy, Birmingham City Art Gallery, several Cork Street galleries in London, and the Judith Blacklock Gallery 83 in Knightsbridge - but it is in Shropshire that she finds her inspiration.

In fact, the Cheshire-born artist was so inspired by the county's bountiful backdrop that she moved here in 2003 and it has been providing ample material for her paintings ever since.



Little Room of Curiosities 36 x 48 inches, oil on box canvas

Small beginnings

Like many creatives, for Natalie a career that wasn't in art was never in question. "I've always drawn from an early age and apparently my infant schoolteacher could tell that my scribbles were different from other children's. It developed from there really," she says.

Having studied Fine Art at the University of Central Lancashire, she went on to complete a post graduate course in Stage Set Design at The Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff. It was here that she derived an understanding for and appreciation of scale and drama in her work - something for which she has since become renowned.

"When I paint flowers, I see it as a personal challenge to capture a particular aspect; it could be the colours, the structure or the drama that interests me. The large scale is also important as I want the viewer to feel surrounded by the loveliness of such an everyday thing," she muses. For example, in her painting *Chiaroscuro* she pays particular attention to the quality of light coming through the petals. "There is such subtlety and softness. I think it is amazing what nature gives us, we just have to take the time to see it. Which is why the scale is so important, it shouts 'look at me!'"

Her style is unequivocally refined, precise, and pure, arguably a trait she admires in other artists as she cites her primary influences as the 17th century Dutch master Ambrosius Bosschaert, the 20th century artist Georgia O'Keefe, photographer Karl Blossfeldt and the contemporary painter Bridget Riley.

Their use of colour and form has inspired Natalie and she has developed a love for this detailed form of painting, preferring to use oil on canvas to build up layers of colour intensity.

"My style is definitely a bit quirky, quite dramatic and I love the Dutch masters for that. I feel that there's always some element that I'm trying to reach and it's just out of my grasp, so I keep exploring and refining," she explains.

Swallow Race 65 x 75 inches, oil on box canvas



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"I really enjoy this exactness in other artists, it's a kind of pureness, a simplicity that's very alluring."

Flights of fancy

One thing that is in plentiful supply in our region is the rich flora and fauna, both of which are subjects of interest for Natalie. "The birds have become a bit of an obsession! As well as the gorgeousness of looking closely at them, it has something to do with their innocence, their naivety of spirit and of course their freedom," she explains. She is often commissioned to create pieces celebrating the unique characteristics of a particular type of bird, one such example is the painting entitled *Swallow Race*. "It was the aerial acrobatics I wanted to try to get across, little flashes of colour darting here and there, so focused on their task," she explains.

Natalie often paints locally-found species such as herons, swans, and kingfishers, however her customers are not always from this side of the pond: "I had a commission a few years ago from a client in New York who wanted a huge painting of swallows and blossom. That was great fun and the largest piece I've painted to date," she recalls.

"I love the Shropshire countryside, even when it's raining or cold, I enjoy walking with my dog, seeing the changes of the seasons and picking up ideas along the way," she says.

But with her artwork in demand, does she get much time for anything else?

"My typical day starts with yoga in the morning as it helps to put me in the right mindset. If I'm working on a painting, then it's full steam ahead all day with a couple of dog walks thrown in," she says. Animals are certainly close to her heart. →



One of Natalie's wallpaper designs

"If I wasn't a painter I would definitely be working with animals in some way. I have considered volunteering at a dogs' home, but I'd want to bring them all home so have decided to stick with painting instead," she laughs.

New ideas are surfacing

Many artists enjoy expanding into new areas in the continual search for a creative outlet, and for Natalie, her interest in surface design, largely encouraged by her love of set and stage, is something that she has begun exploring.

"I'm interested in décor and I'm in the process of developing some surface pattern designs based on my work that hopefully will become available to the public," she says. "This is an area I would love to develop more, it's so exciting re-developing previous paintings into something new. I've long been fascinated with rotational and reflective symmetry and am thoroughly enjoying playing with this idea," she says. She also has published a collection of her bird paintings and is planning on curating a similar collection of her flower art works.

Many artists appreciate the pleasure that original artwork can bring in their own homes, so does Natalie have a particular piece she holds dear? "I love a bit of quirkiness and have a lenticular which I love, a Salvador Dali print, lots of artists' work that I've just picked up or been lucky enough to meet at shows, but I'm always looking for more to add to my collection," she muses. With that said, does



'If someone likes my work enough to have it on their wall – what's not to be happy about?'

she have a favourite piece of her own work? "So far it has to be *Little room of curiosities* as I'm really enjoying exploring some unusual objects with stories," she says.

"I have a fascination for decay, I don't see

this as a negative at all, it's just another step in life. I love old buildings that have fallen into disrepair and with this painting, I imagined that a family had left their house leaving behind personal objects and nature has slowly crept in taking back what once was theirs."

In fact, being able to experiment with her subject is one of the ways she is able to refresh and refine her work, helping her to remain inspired and attract new commercial interest too – as was the case recently when her work was accepted at The Royal Academy for its summer show. "It may sound trite but each time someone buys one of my paintings I feel very proud," she reflects. "If someone likes my work enough to have it on their wall, what's not to be happy about?"

So how does one know when a piece is of value and worth parting with your hard-earned cash for?

"When choosing a piece of art, I'd always say to go with your heart," she says.

With increasing access to new artists via social media, are there any emerging artists whose stars she thinks are set to go stratospheric? "I'm slowly getting the hang of Instagram and follow lots of artists on there. I'm not sure if they are emerging artists, but it is always great to see what people are up to," she notes. Finally, does she have any advice for any budding artists out there keen to break into professional art world? "I would always support someone who would like to be an artist, yes it's hard work but don't give up, you never know what's around the corner!"

Natalie currently exhibits her work nationally at the Quantum Contemporary Arts in Battersea – who take work all over the world to art fairs – also the Soden Gallery in Shrewsbury; the White Horse in Banbury; The Ragleth Gallery in Church Stretton; and the Linden Tree in Much Wenlock.

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Painted Lady 19.5 x 27.5 inches, oil on box canvas