**Q&A with 2017 Sunday Times Watercolour Competition Exhibitor Debbie Ayles and Emma Walker Communications Assistant, Parker Harris Partnership**

*Debbie Ayles, who exhibited as part of The Sunday Times Watercolour Competition 2017, uses water-based paints to explore the varying effects of light and shadow as they play across and within city and vernacular architecture.  In her own words, ‘the calm ghostliness of the structure and the maelstrom and power of the colour blend the concept of abstract and realism’, drawing attention to what is there but often unnoticed and quite beautiful.  Ahead of the launch of the 2018 edition of the Competition, I spoke to Debbie about her inspiration, her process and her experience of watercolour within the contemporary art world.*

**In terms of subject matter, architecture holds a particular fascination for you.  Why is this?**

I’m a pattern-seeker. I see patterns in some of the most unexpected places which is such a joy. I explore the identity of modern architecture that inspires me and where the structures appear to consist of strong shapes, grids, horizontals and verticals.

I see how the environment softens the impact of the building by reflections caused by the weather and the presence of people. That’s when the momentary shapes appear, due to the sun, cloud movement and reflections of surrounding structures or trees which are then reflected or absorbed by the building in question. My paintings aim to create a new perception designed to awaken the imagination of the viewer.

**You describe a typical painting as ‘a distillation of months of observations and experiments’.  Can you tell us a little bit more about this process?**

My choice of subject matter and the way in which I want to represent it has always entailed a detailed analysis of source material. I take a number of photographs, capturing the different light effects as the weather changes and as the movement and passage of time alters what I am looking at. Returning to the studio I deconstruct the image, reducing it to forms and structures that hold it together. There becomes a vibrant interplay of organic and geometric shapes that are at once figurative and abstract.

I include all the shadows, reflections, sunbursts, clouds, people or vehicles that describe the building and its environment, captured at that moment in time. The drawing becomes a puzzle to untangle as foregrounds and backgrounds merge. Sometimes I eliminate areas to remove any ‘striping’ that can occur in modern architecture (a factor in photosensitive responses) where the line-up of windows or structural supports conveys a series of tightly spaced parallel lines. I draw, re-draw and consider each result.

Then comes the free-for-all, a release from the concentration of drawing in the studio, when thin washes and thicker layers of paint begin to cover the surface. I love doing this in the garden where I can splash, pour and drip the colours I have chosen to represent the subject matter, with no concerns about annoying any other artists nearby, or creating a massive clean-up job in the studio! The control I impose in the studio is relaxed as the paints find their own levels, react with each other, and embrace the odd blade of grass or passing fly!

I’m at the mercy of the weather conditions which dictate how long or quickly the paint may dry. This creates an energetic need to be aware of decisions and rectify areas that might be losing their integrity. Finally, when the paint is completely dry, I use thin washes of paint to transpose the negative of my drawing carefully onto the surface. At this point the spaces that form the structure and give windows through into the background layers of colour are decided and selected to create a balance of uniting and yet separating the many layers of paint.

**Your paintings are characterised not only by level of detail but also by intensity of colour.  How do you make the two work so well together?**

For many years I was unable to use intense colours in my work. During my Art Degree I began researching with doctors and scientists on the impact of colour on our visual perception and discovered that I was photosensitive and that the use of intense colours in my work at the time was triggering my migraines. After co-publishing a number of scientific papers, post degree I was awarded The Wellcome Trust Sciart Award through which I would collaborate with a scientist to investigate this particular iteration of photosensitivity further. Through the project, which was based at the University of Essex, I learned which colours to avoid and most importantly how to distribute them in ways that didn’t trigger my photosensitivity. We succeeded in designing a computer model that is available to assist in the measuring of both 2D and 3D artworks in the case of there being a suspicion that they could trigger migraines or epileptic reactions.

Consequently, for a few years I painted purely in pastel shades and more neutral colours. However they did not achieve the effect I was looking for so I cautiously returned to more intense colours and found that avoiding mosaic-like striped distributions of strong colour enabled me to return to the palette I enjoy. Using a paler wash to construct the subject on the surface softens the impact of the animated paint below.

**How do you deal with mistakes when painting?**

Watercolour is a surprisingly forgiving medium. I used to be very concerned about making a mistake and straying from what I had planned to do. But mistakes don’t actually exist as nothing can be perfect. They are just the painting taking back a bit of control, offering me a choice as to what to do, making me see that the painting could go in another direction and lead me on to another journey. When I realised this it was such a release to rethink how I was approaching painting and my vision of how I wanted it to be. The freedom to go ‘off-piste’ was new to me and now every new idea or painting is like setting off on an exciting new adventure.

**What is the most memorable exhibition of watercolour works that you have ever been to see?  What was it that has made it stick in your memory?**

The Paul Klee exhibition *Making the Visible* at the Tate Modern back in 2014 had quite an impact on me. I was reassured that strong linear representations of subjects – often with no contouring – is a perfectly acceptable manner of drawing and painting.  Tremendously affirming, as this is the way that I work too.

I like to take a line for a walk and see where it goes. My paintings are an extension of this process of working as I construct the architecture and patterns that I have discovered by leaving the space between the watery pale shapes to become the ‘line’, by letting the eye follow this space in between shapes and go on a journey through the painting. I learned a great deal by observing Klee’s varied use of watercolour and of simple shapes to represent objects.

The reproductions of Klee’s linear drawings and paintings in books and the small number of his works I had seen previously did not prepare me for the ‘wow’ factor of seeing in the flesh the colour, style and design that were the life blood of his practice.

**Why did you choose to enter The Sunday Times Watercolour Competition 2017?**

The Sunday Times Watercolour Competition is one the most prestigious competitions an artist can hope to be part of. I thought it was a significant opportunity to have my work judged by a jury and seen by a wide audience.

The chance to meet other entrants and hear how they work – discuss processes, materials and experiences – is so valuable. The acknowledgement that your own painting is hanging alongside such top-quality work provides encouragement along this frustrating absorbing thrilling challenging career path that I have chosen!‍

<https://www.sundaytimeswatercolour.org/news-blog/q-a-with-2017-exhibitor-debbie-ayles>