

Fresh perspective

Delicacy, observation and exuberance are all to be found in the work of Cranbrook-based artist Toby Ward

WORDS: Jane Maltby

“**T**he physical joy of drawing a line – it’s fabulous,” says Toby Ward.

He’s in his Cranbrook studio, one wall all windows, with bookcases floor to ceiling and canvases stacked against tables. It’s a busy room, full of reference material, including the rows of pocket-size sketchbooks where all his ideas start.

He’s worked as an artist in residence for the UK’s major institutions and his other commissions include interiors, portraits and books of sketches for people in beautiful houses – joyful, busy lives suggested by a sling-back shoe on its side, coats hung up behind a door. There are whole worlds in there.

He’s also sent a peloton of vibrant cycling pictures out from his Cranbrook studio since the Tour de France came to Kent back in 2007 – “a painter’s dream, because it’s all about colour and movement.” These pictures show imaginary French landscapes, that joyful line translated into the road winding ahead of the cyclists, passing villages on a mountain, picnic blankets and errand dogs.

He makes a connection between the humanity and frenetic activity in these pictures (“a cycle race, it’s 30 seconds of action but you get two hours of entertainment”) and his many projects as an artist in residence, which have included visually documenting building works at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden and at Westminster



Photo: Toby Ward

The Kitchen Cat – an example of the wide variety of styles Toby uses

Abbey, and the opening up 30 years ago of Chastleton in Oxfordshire, the untouched National Trust property. He's due back there this year for a return residency.

Looked at one way, it's decades of drawing men in hard hats. From another perspective, it's about the very nature of physical work, "of human existence and activity".

"I have an irresistible urge to look round the next corner and find out the next thing I'm going to do"

"I've made a lot of paintings and drawings out of other people's work, which has always been rather nice because people don't think about their work, or their colleagues' work, until it's suddenly presented in a different way to them and they feel rather better about it. And people like having artists around when they're working."

This jolt in perspective is characteristic. As a student, Ward was influenced by David Hockney's panoramic photo collages. "I like to look, I like to be able to look everywhere, so I'm looking up and down. You have to be quite confident with your use of perspective, which also means you don't abide by the rules of perspective – you just have to make it look right."



Photo: Jane Kebley



Photo: Toby Ward

ABOVE:
The drawing room of the Athenaeum club, captured in a watercolour by Toby

BELOW:
Toby Ward in his Cranbrook studio

His father, celebrated society portraitist and landscape artist John Ward (who lived in Bilting, between Ashford and Canterbury), cautioned him "to adhere to a 60-degree cone of vision". He admires his father's work immensely but... "Any child being told something by a parent is going to see it as a challenge, aren't they? I saw it as a valid thing to do."

Ward's body of work reflects this desire to challenge the status quo. "I have an irresistible urge to look round the next corner and find out the next thing I'm going to do," he says. "I really enjoy working in lots of different mediums. I don't sculpt – I don't have the skills of the builder so everything I make falls apart – but in two dimensions it's my world and it's where I can play, however I want."

He and his wife Alison, a solicitor working in Tunbridge Wells, moved out of London, first to Ticehurst, and then to Cranbrook, buying a house with a big garden for their three children, and a collection of outbuildings that could be swept away to make a studio. Cranbrook, for him, "is a very happy place. It's a town full of teenagers and energy and life".

Lockdown provided another chance to change perspective.

Following years of commuting to his residence locations, Ward was restricted to the studio. He started doing glimmering still life pictures and colourful scenes influenced by Georges Braque. "The thing about drawing and painting is the more you do it the more interesting it gets. Every now and and again you think, 'I'm just beginning to understand this'."

He mentions a number of artists quietly waiting in memory to influence him. There's Stanley Spencer, whose 'ribbonlike' Clyde shipbuilding series first showed Ward the possibility of distorting perspective to provide a narrative of physical labour. Hockney's draftmanship, of course; Tilman Riemenschneider, the 15th-century German woodcarver who, like Ward, placed his figures carefully to create a story.

And then, this joyous insight: "When I'm working on paper I'm almost directly connected to the watercolourists and draftsmen of the early to mid-20th century: Eric Ravilious and his wife Tirzah Garwood, John Nash, Thomas Hennell, Edward Bawden. These are the people and their friends who taught my dad, who taught me – so there's a line of descent there." ♦