

An abstract painting with thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, green, purple, and white. The composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing more saturated than others. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and color contrast.

THE LYNDA COTTON GALLERY
22 MAY – 12 JUNE 2016

IN PROXIMITY

KITTY STIRLING
AND ANGUS STIRLING

The Lynda Cotton Gallery
Watchet, Somerset





Landscape I Oil on board, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm

KITTY STIRLING

In evocative and sensual paintings Kitty Stirling holds atmospheric and naturalistic, plastic and painterly qualities in check. Neither dominate the other and while strong and structural paint marks and strident unmodulated gestures of the brush grab the immediate attention on the picture surface, there also remains in residual form a glimpse of landscape space and through it elusive memories of place.

This uncanny capacity to retain palpable mystery and qualities of haunting memory through the paradoxically base, physical means of the art of painting makes one think of Nicholas de Stael, Peter Lanyon, Howard Hodgkin and late Prunella Clough, lofty company perhaps but one that provides Stirling's art with a valid benchmark. Her admiration for these masters is a function of Stirling's own ambition and seriousness of purpose.

Her part Scottish background also provides a clue, a birthright almost, to the use of colour, painterly flourish and merging of subject with form, that stems from a tartan congruence with modern French art. Her own artistic training and career has not, however, taken place north of the border or in France, but in London and West Somerset. In the capital she studied at Chelsea and the Byam Shaw Schools of Art during the later 1980's, and is indeed currently studying for her Masters at City and Guilds of London Art School.

Where West Somerset is concerned, where her family has a home, she has often drawn on the Quantocks, the Exmoor coast and Bristol Channel with its stunning views and prime walking country. In the present exhibition a series of semi abstract paintings, including *Landscape 6*, focus on views in and around the village of Bicknoller, though without topographical specificity. The independent life of paint and the spatial properties of pictorial composition assume more importance in these works than observational accuracy.

Her use of collage in other works, either in the form of torn colour fragments or cut up photos, is abstract in quality, Stirling knowing well that collage is inherently abstract and must remain so if kitsch or vulgarity is to be avoided. At the other end of the expressive spectrum, comes the thin colour gestures, where painted marks are naked records of their own random, alla prima formations. Such informal gesturalism, when

she pulls it off, is akin to a state of grace, the artist equating weather and landscape mood with raw human emotion.

The various dichotomies within Stirling's work reflect her double life as an advantaged and educated independent on the one hand and as a grass roots art world activist and teacher on the other. They are also the outcome of a life oscillating between town and country. Nowhere has this rural/urban life been more obvious than in her allotment series of drawings and paintings shown in a previous exhibition at Lynda Cotton Gallery in Watchet. As a rural microcosm in a wider urban environment, the allotment has long provided a fascination for Stirling, who sees in it a return to the community spirit and grow-your-own self help of the egalitarian post war era. The deftly drawn ramshackle sheds on these allotment sites also reflect what in formal, purely artistic terms is the power of structure and man made factors within a broad naturalism.

A third front between town and country was opened up by her living part of the year around the millennium on the Aegean island of Samos, where the peasant way of life and its inspiring accord with history and geography moved her. This same spirit accompanied her on art world projects in which, instead of only playing the art world power system, with its dubious politics and pecking order, she has contributed through creative ventures with like-minded artists, many involving the community curating exhibitions, some aimed at the vital promotion and encouragement of emerging young talent, saw her run the Tricycle Gallery at Kilburn's Tricycle Theatre aimed at such artists.

From her own solo Tricycle exhibition, she was taken on by art dealer Caroline Wiseman, who showed Stirling at prominent London art fairs as well as in her then South London home. These were followed by a successful 2013 solo at Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art in the bohemian Ladbroke Grove area, where Stirling had grown up in the 1970's. Successful selections for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, the Discerning Eye Exhibition and the Lynn Painter-Stainers Prize Exhibition added to her prestigious portfolio.

Her current return to Watchet brings her back to a country where she in part belongs and to whose inimitable landscape her work so effectively and intimately relates.

Peter Davies February 2016



Landscape 2 Acrylic on board, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 3 Acrylic on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 4 Oil on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 5 Oil on board, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 6 Oil on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 7 Oil on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Landscape 8 Acrylic on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Bicknoller 1 Charcoal on paper, 2015, 37.5 x 50.5 cm



Kilve 1 Acrylic on paper, 2015, 26 x 36 cm



Kilve 2 Oil on paper, 2015, 26 x 36 cm



Blue Anchor: Such Stillness*

Acrylic on board, 2016,
37 x 50 cm

* Paintings marked with an asterisk have their origin in a recent collection of Somerset poems: *Toll Road*, by Stephen Carroll.

ANGUS STIRLING

The paintings of Angus Stirling teeter tantalysingly on the edge of figuration and abstraction when the observed and the invented, or the cultural and natural worlds collide. Despite the tangible sensuality and overtly painterly quality of Stirling's compositions, where anatomy of paint as a physical substance, and colour as an expressive emotional and mood-creating phenomenon hold sway, the pictures retain content and subject by telling a story or bearing witness to that overriding feeling for *genius loci*.

One may easily invoke here a knowing pastoralism and English preoccupation for place, but Stirling's sharp and broad palette, it's knowing kinship to the blocky forms of Keith Vaughan or the calligraphic sweeps of Ivon Hitchens notwithstanding, is essentially Scottish in character and that tartan chromatic brogue and energetic handling in turn surely speaks of an aesthetic auld alliance, a bi-passing of London and the South, to embrace the French school. Stirling is in fact acutely aware of the danger of Hitchens's inimitable style, electing instead to admire the celebrated Sussex based painter at a distance and take what he can and then only for the exigencies of his own art. This holds true for the second-generation New York School gestural painter, Helen Frankenthaler, a poster of whose light hued and sonorous work adorns his studio in West Somerset's Quantock Hills. The airy openness and stained gesturalism of the great American's art is, however, quite different to the tactile and densely worked palette knife manner with strong, rather than atmospheric colour that features in much of Angus Stirling's work. Perhaps we can locate him somewhere between the abstracted figuration of Paul Cezanne or Nicholas de Stael and the outdoor romantic informalism of late Joan Eardley, mid period Peter Lanyon, Willem de Kooning or Jean-Paul Riopelle.

Despite Angus's distinguished career in public and cultural life in London and the south where his work for the National Trust was, as he explains, 'relevant to my love of landscape', his Scottish ancestry is obvious in more ways than one. In fact, Angus's mother painted seriously and early on influenced and encouraged her son who was however, to put his passion on hold for most of his working life. But the irresistible urge to paint returned twenty years ago when, upon retirement during the mid 1990's, he took up the brush with a vengeance. He edged back by studying in Marlborough with Robin Child at the

Lydgate Art Research Centre. It was not until ten years later that Stirling began exhibiting his hard won art in earnest. When he did, the results were an enormously satisfying vindication of his perseverance and efforts.

Stirling also paints under the avowed inspiration of classical music and romantic poetry. There is of course nothing new about modern art's enlistment of the kinaesthetic course, and the notion of art as a kind of visual music with its laws of harmony, counterpoint and so on, has pervaded much of the avant garde or progressive painting of the last century. Likewise in Surrealism literature and poetry and the theatre of the absurd impinged as radically as the purely visual. Artists have often illustrated poems, though in Stirling's case one sees an incurably painterly, rather than graphic artist, using poetry and music as indirect inspirations, in the same way that Kandinsky's notion concerning the spiritual in art was not denomination or doctrinaire or programmatic.

Drawing on the unrivalled north-facing views across the Bristol Channel to south Wales near his country retreat, puts us in mind of Coleridge and the Romantic poets, but his interpretations and simplifications are fired by his plastic imagination, that is, by his deep and sensual feel for paint and colour. The ancient landscapes on the Isle of Lewes equally inspire him, not as something to slavishly copy but to subject to psychic transformation and free poetic license.

Returning north of the border from his West Country base, Stirling engages with one of the most spectacular and untainted wildernesses left in Europe to posit dramatic topographic and gorgeously coloured scenarios. On occasion he can inadvertently invoke classic German expressionist iconography, as in the deep and ambiguously reflective mountain lakes in Stirling's 'Highland Lake'. A visit to the Hebrides in 2014 inspired 'Highland Waterfall', animated by downward gestures of black, green and white. In thin, horizontal compositions like 'Snowflurry', Stirling adopts the distant prospect lit up by a dramatic, crystal and distorting winter light. In these extravagant examples we find an artist using his medium to transcend nature and to ask that perennial artistic, but also mystical question, that imponderable issue to do with man and his place in the universe.

Peter Davies March 2016



Snowflurry: Western Highlands Acrylic on board, 2015, 55 x 76 cm



Tarr Steps, River Barle, Exmoor Acrylic on board, 2015, 51 x 38 cm



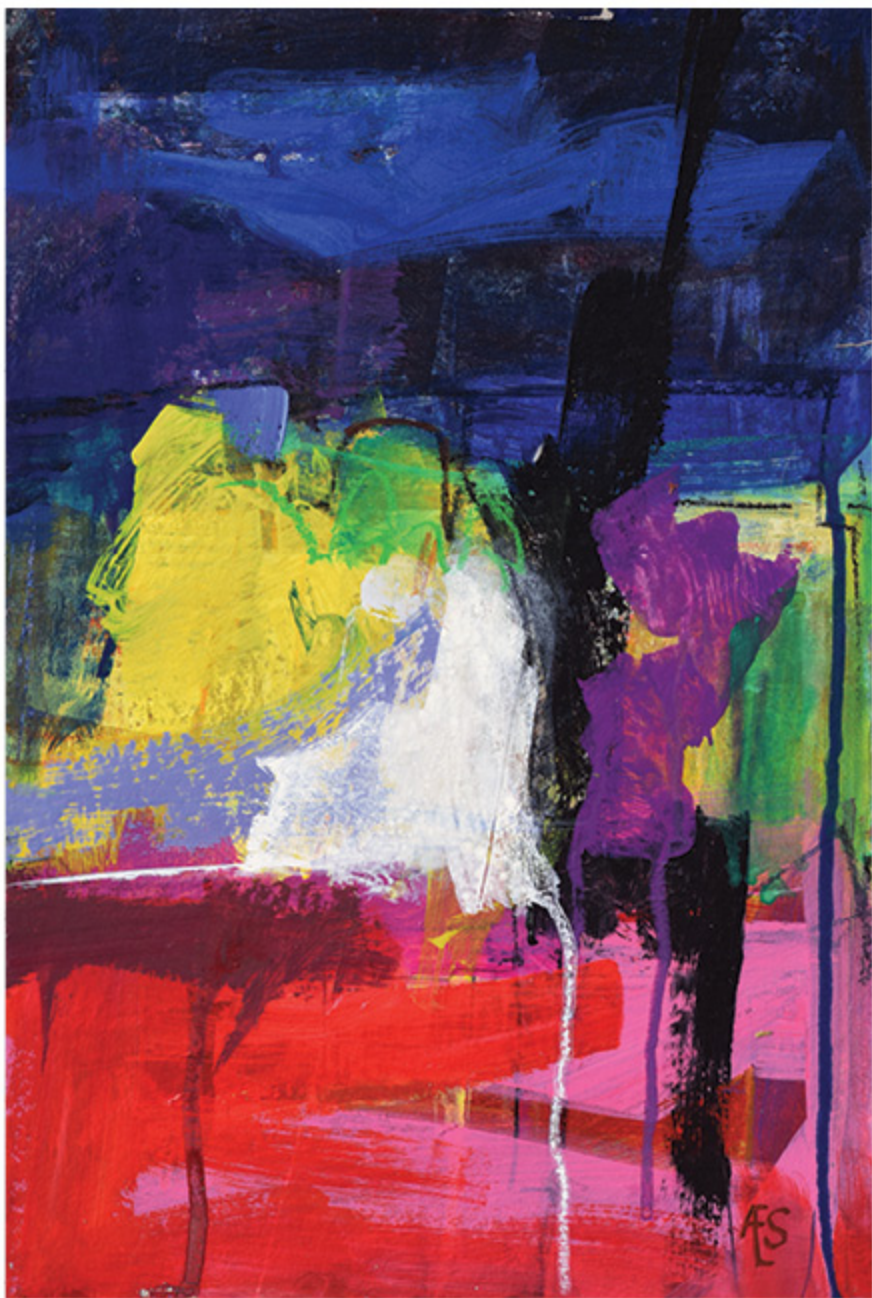
Hebridean Waterfall Acrylic & graphite on board, 2016, 76 x 55 cm



Blue Anchor: The Washed Moon* Acrylic on board, 2016, 37 x 50 cm



Fantasia in the Orient
Acrylic and chalk on board, 2015,
37 x 50 cm



Turkish Dream Acrylic, oil and crayon on board, 2015, 54 x 36 cm



Benedicite: Looking Towards Wales* Acrylic on board, 2015, 37 x 50 cm



Textiles on the Silk Road Acrylic and oil on board, 2016, 50 x 38 cm



Highland Water Near Arisaig Acrylic on board, 2015, 37 x 50 cm