

**Q & A: A New Series for Friends of York Art Gallery Where Practising Artists Answer Questions About Their Practice**

**3.**

**Lesley Birch, Yorkshire-based painter, discusses her work.**



*Lesley Birch in her studio, signing works on paper.*

*Can you describe your artistic practice?*

I draw/paint every day – often in sketchbooks of which I have hundreds. I work on paper, board and canvas. I have two studios – one at home and the other a shared space at PICA Studios in Grape Lane, York. My practice involves responding to what I see and feel around me – whether it be the actual landscape or a memory of a moment or a feeling. I often work in series, and I always have a source. I'm attracted to remote places – Islay, Scotland's West Coast and Arran. But woodlands have featured in my work too, after an art residency in the Welsh forests. As I live in Yorkshire, there is much to inspire me – Sandsend beach is a

favourite place and the forest at Wass. I don't limit myself to one medium. Generally I choose the medium to suit what I want to say, either oil or acrylics and mixed media.



I go through periods of printmaking, creating dry-points and monotypes; recently I learned the technique of *mokolito* at a fabulous studio in Barcelona.

Lyrical Landscape - wood lithograph (mokolito), Barcelona 2019  
lithographic inks on Fabriano, 50 x 70 cms, © Lesley Birch 2019

*What started you off as an artist?*

I loved drawing and painting as a child. My parents were both artistic, and so I grew up enjoying visits to galleries and painting out at Loch Lomond with my mum.

*Who or what are your influences?*

It's difficult to know who exactly influences me. I think it's a merging of all that I see and love. My mum got me into Van Gogh. And I'm very keen on [Richard Diebenkorn](#), [Joan Eardley](#), [Robert Motherwell](#) and the

[Scottish Colourists](#). On a practical level, American artist [Elise Ansel](#) has been and still is a marvellous support to me - I've attended her masterclasses - she has really pulled out my absolute pleasure in the brush mark and in the malleability of oil paint. I'm a member of the RA, Tate and the V & A, so I absorb a lot of exhibitions every year. Recently an RA Exhibition of the work of Finnish painter [Helene Schjerfbeck](#) just blew me away – it's often portraiture that does this to me. And somehow, it transfers to landscape – I notice the application of the medium, the colour mixing, the texture or glazing, or the line work – one can learn so much.

*How would you describe your recent work?*

Just before lockdown I had a solo show at Partisan in Micklegate – I had worked on large abstract pieces – Musical Abstracts - and was excited to be showing them – these were about music and movement in Nature. And I was on a real roll. This work stems from walks around Wass, Yorkshire and is full of vital marks and energy, soft and sharp colour expressing the flurry of leaves in the breeze or bright branch catching my eye. I also produced new larger paintings for Glyndebourne, expressing the wind and floods in York Museum Gardens. I'm interested in the putting down of paint to express my response to this experience.

But also it is about the sheer joy of painting, as in the Musical Abstract Collection.



Flurry i and Flurry ii - 94 x 94 cms - Mixed Media on Linen, Musical Abstract Collection.

© Lesley Birch 2020



Wind & Flood i, and Wind & Flood ii, 84 x 64 cms, Mixed Media on Linen, Musical Abstract Collection, Glyndebourne Forces of Nature Exhibition

© Lesley Birch 2020

*What would you say is the main challenge in your practice?*

The main challenge is keeping things fresh. It's easy to get tired and worn or repeat oneself. When that happens I need to take a break and stop to recharge. Sometimes I just play in my sketchbook with a new medium. Sometimes I change the size of canvas. But always, I try to put myself out of my comfort zone. We artists can often feel cocooned into creating the same painting over and over, and we get pigeon-holed into what people think we are. For me, I chop and change between a recognisable sense of landscape and playful abstraction. Creating can be exhausting, although many people say it must be so relaxing to be a painter. Not at all!

*How has this recent period of lockdown affected your work?*

Exhibitions were cancelled – York Open Studios, a residency in Scotland at Cove Park, a return visit to Barcelona Print Studio was cancelled. And a long-planned Forces of Nature show at Glyndebourne, about which I was so excited, had to go online. No preview, no opportunity to visit Glyndebourne. So I just thought. Great: I have no appointments. And I returned to painting and playing in my home studio – with my love of a horizon line, sweeping marks and emotive skies over land and sea. I made daily memory



landscapes on paper – filming myself in a self-motivated project I called [#LesleyBirch21Days](#). I had to work from memory and sketches and I chose to work in oil and develop my skills in this medium. I had no social interaction with my colleagues at PICA, and so just kept going in my home studio – it was a weird intensive experience – filming myself painting – something I'd always intended to do but never made time for it. I produced over 50 small landscapes of oils on paper – these came from my head – the feeling of Islay's cold winds in Scotland and the green turquoise seas of Cornwall.



*Perfect Day*



*The Rugged Shore*

*Oil on Arches Paper, 28 x 30 cms, #lesleybirch21days lockdown collection, © Lesley Birch 2020*

I posted the time-lapse films on Instagram and the paintings. These were raw, real, unframed and I was fortunate enough to be able to sell these pieces as far afield as New Zealand and Australia through an

initiative called The Artist Support Pledge, where, for every £1000 sold, I pledged to buy another artist's work for £200. This meant I have become even more of a collector, buying work by [Daisy Cook](#), [Amy Dennis](#), [Rosemary Vanns](#), [Helen Riches](#), and lots of current artists I admire and whose work I could never normally afford.



Now we are in June and I have moved away from oils into watercolour and acrylic combined with printmaking, again on paper. So my artistic journey continues.

*West Coast Yellow Green Blue, 30 x 60 cms,  
printmaking and acrylic on Moulin du Roy Paper.*

© Lesley Birch 2020

*Do you have a website where our members can find out more about your practice?*

Yes, it's [www.lesleybirchart.com](http://www.lesleybirchart.com).

© Lesley Birch and Judith Glover, 2020