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Works of Art: an interview with Ros Ridley

Ros Ridley is a Fellow and Tutor at Newnham College, Cambridge, and former Head of the Medical Research Council Comparative Cognition Team in the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge.

She is also a talented artist.

Rose Hepworth: Why did you begin painting? And what came first, the painting or the research?

Ros Ridley: I started drawing when I was a child. In fact, I started when I was about three. I can show you a picture that I drew of Ginger the Cat from 1953, when I was three and a half. My mother kept this – I think I remember doing it. Of course we all develop memories that are not really true but I think I remember doing it and being very pleased with it at the time. So I did that, and I did others as time went by, and I went to school, and would have done art at school except that I was quite clever and so I was told that I had to do academic subjects. And then I was told that I'd never earn a living painting and that I should do something sensible, and so I did science. But I always did it as a bit of a hobby and in some ways I think that probably was the right solution because I did earn a good living. But also I wasn't really attuned to the way art was during that period – and still is – in that the art I'm interested in is visual representation. Representation to some extent, that is; not accuracy for its own sake. But I'm interested in visual perception, which is also where I pursued my academic career. Mine is not mainstream contemporary art, and I probably wouldn't have enjoyed that field. So in that respect, it was the right decision. I also feel that in both science and art, there's a lot of personality involved. You have to put yourself across. And yet in science, there's the data and the evidence as well, which is like your ammunition. Whereas, in the arts it can be very much who you are rather than what you've done. I've always found that quite difficult in science so I think I would have found it quite uncomfortable in a performance art. And one of the things I like about painting is that although it's about communication, and I want somebody to see something and see the same thing I see, I don't have to do it immediately. The person who looks at the painting might see it weeks or months later. To do something that you can communicate to someone without having that immediate performance aspect of it is liberating.

-So how do you work? Do you work on a piece intensely until it's finished or do you keep coming back to a piece?

The greater part of the project is spent thinking, sketching, designing, checking – sometimes having a trial run. I can't work for more than two hours at a time. I get tired quite quickly, and I feel I can only draw and paint when I'm at my best. And because, when I was working in science, I only had a limited amount of time, I needed something that I could do in short bursts, leave and come back to. And so the early paintings tended to include an element of drawing with colour added later. I've just recently started oil painting, which is very different and involves a great deal of mess and so you get set up and you can't stop. And then there are bigger, more sploshy watercolours that I can't stop. So I have to say to my husband, 'Harry, I'm doing a granulated wash – if the phone rings, I'm not answering it!' For example, this one, 'The Lobster'. 'Pisa Cathedral, West Façade' is more like my earlier work because it has an ink under-drawing to it so that I can go away and then come back and do a bit more.

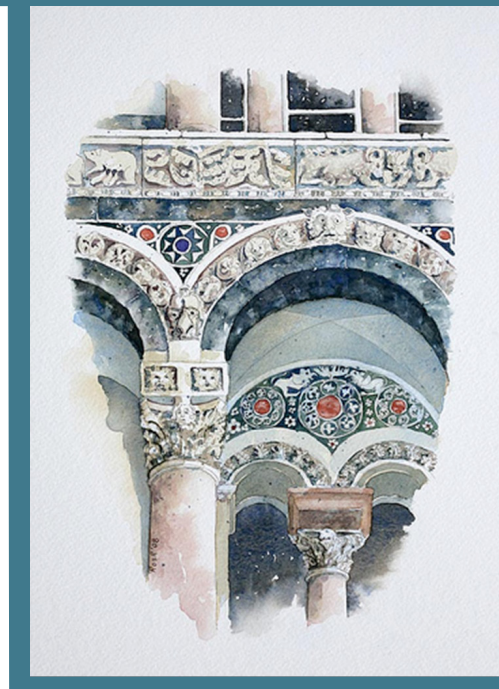
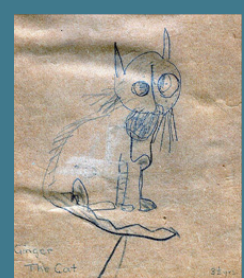
-Can you explain a granulated wash for our readers?

With a granulated wash you have to put just the right concentration of the

paint on. If it's too dry, it doesn't work. If it's too wet, it doesn't work. Then the colour just precipitates out, in a way that looks atmospheric. But only certain colours do this. So it's all very technical and, of course, with my scientific background, I like the technicalities of all sorts of different pigments and grain sizes and things.

-What about themes in your work?

One of the things I've noticed is that themes keep cropping up over my life. I mean, if you look at all the cats, the early cat from 1953 does seem to belong with the others in some way – even though there's a fifty-seven year gap between them. So there are themes. What I find is that a good idea comes to me, and it works and I do it a few times and then it gets jaded, and then I have to do something complete-





ly different. I do a lot of Venetian buildings, and I do old buildings and Romanesque buildings – but Baroque and later, I just couldn't get to work. And then it just came to me one night, as if in a dream, that I needed to do it in oil paints. There's something about the solidness of the oil paints. So this is one of my new ones ['San Geremia, Venice']. I've now done two oil paintings and I'm on the third one. But I do swap about because I have something to say and so when I've said it, I find something else to say.

-And do you sell your work?

Well people sometimes ask me whether I paint what I want to paint or whether I paint to sell the pictures. And I say, well, I enjoy selling pictures enormously, but I see no conflict because I want to say, 'Look, the world is this beautiful'. And I want you to think so too. And if you think so enough to want to put my picture on your wall, then that's absolutely great. But there's no conflict between doing what I want and doing what other people want. I've done one or two commissions, but I would usually say 'no' because I couldn't do it to order. I have to have that 'something' and if I don't have that 'something' then I couldn't possibly paint it. But once I've had that 'something', I want someone to hear, so of course I want someone to buy the picture.

-You often work from photographs when you paint. How does what you paint into a picture differ from what you see in the photograph?

Of course I do sketches but I don't stand there painting for hours on the side of a busy street. More often that not, I've already seen the thing that it is, that makes me want to paint it, and then Harry or I take the photograph in order to prompt whatever it is that I saw in the original. So I couldn't paint a picture from a photograph that somebody else has given me. But Harry and I have been there and we've seen it and we've photographed it. So, for example, this ['Rue du Renard, Paris'] is a filthy, scruffy building on a busy road with buses going past just on the side of the Pompidou Centre in Paris. And yet, I just saw this .

-Wow, but it's really beautiful in your painting!

Yes, and I assure you, you could walk past it for years and not see it that way, and that's what I'm trying to do.

-And on the subject of perception – is there an overlap between your research interests and what interests you about painting?

I've had a considerable interest in vision in my research. My PhD was in visual neurophysiology and my career has been in medical research for the treatment of neurological illnesses. Most neuropsychologists will use vision as the area through which they study because it's much easier to study vision than, for example, smell. So you have to know a lot about vision, and about the neurology of vision – the relationship between the eyes and the brain. And about the things that can go wrong. For example, you can get brain-blindness, where the eye works but the brain doesn't. Sometimes people are unable to understand what they see – which is very difficult to imagine. The colours might be seen and the shapes might be seen but the understanding that what you're looking at is a bicycle has gone away. And being able to see is closely related to memory and experience. You have to learn to see. There are a few people who are born blind but whose eyes are corrected in adulthood, and then all of a sudden light is going into the eyes and sending information into the brain for the first time. But they can't understand what they see because their experience of the world has not been built on vision. There's a phrase that neuropsychologists use: analysis by synthesis. It means you look at something and you don't analyse it, you synthesise it. You



make an object out of your vision – and the more experience and memory you have, the more closely you can see it. And, when I'm painting, I have an idea in my head about what I see, and I want to get that idea into your head. But what you have in your head is a construction as well, and it might not bear much resemblance to what's out there. It's like any other form of communication. What I



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cont.

say, and the meaning you construct from what I say, may be completely different, and that's why things go wrong sometimes. And painting is exactly the same. I've got to get something from here (in my head) to there (in your head), via a piece of paper, which is flat and bears no resemblance at all to what's out there in the real world and, to some extent, what's on the paper interferes with that message. Many artists will say that the best pictures are the ones that have the least in them. Too much detail doesn't get the message across in the same way as something that's much lighter. I can show you an example ['Girl in Rajasthan']. I'm very pleased with this picture. This girl has a big turquoise slab down the right-hand-side of her face. Of course, she doesn't really. But it works, because what you see is what I mean you to see, but

that's not actually what's on the page. If I were to start painting her eyelashes in, it would interfere with the picture – it would interfere with the construction in your head and that would be a failure of communication.

-And where do you, as the artist, fit in to that process?

I think Ego completely destroys art. If you're painting so that people will like it, or to do well, then that Ego gets in the way. You've really got to get that out of the way.

-That's interesting. When Helaine Blumenfeld spoke to The Arts Society at Newnham last year, she said something similar: that you had to go beyond the self in order to produce really good creative work.

Yes, I remember – I thought that was a brilliant talk that she gave and I agree with her absolutely. So many people think art is about self-expression, and there's a place for it, but it's more like meditation in a way. You need to get away from yourself, and into another place, which is calmer and just involves looking at the world. But if you let yourself get in the way, then it just spoils it.

Many of Ros Ridley's pictures are available to view online on her Flickr page: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rosridley>