

CONVERSATION

Wells Fray-Smith

Curator, Barbican Museum London

Heidrun Rathgeb
Artist

Let's start with where you are. Can you describe where you are and locate yourself?

I live in the south of Germany near Lake Constance in a farmhouse that's all by itself and that's where I've got my studio too. I live here with my family, my husband and our six children, our oldest studying in Norway. And my studio is in the attic and I have a barn next door with my printing press.

And where we are is really quite close to the Alps, so I see them from my studio window, which is nice. *The Alps, mountains, landscape and nature feature heavily in your work, so that's a great way to lead me into asking how you generate the images. How do they come to be?*

Initially I'm painting or I make prints from drawings. I have these little sketchbooks. I always draw in sketchbooks that are the same scale. I do sketches when I'm out hiking. I love hiking and I like going to the woods next to the farmhouse. And often I am drawing my children.

So everything is real, it's something you've experienced out in the world.

It's always something real, yes. Usually when I start drawing, I feel prompted by a special moment. I don't draw just a pretty scene, it doesn't interest me - it's got to be something that hits me and then I'll do the drawing. Sometimes a very fleeting moment, a certain cloud in the sky or one of my children sitting in a certain way. And I do the drawings almost like scribbles... I finish in about a minute or five minutes at the most.

Part of what I find so moving about your work is that it's essentially all about noticing; noticing what is already around you and then capturing it.

Yes, it is very much about noticing and then about translating, and reinventing.

How do you know when a drawing is ready to become a painting? What is your process in selecting this whole archive of drawings and things that you've seen?

There is no set rule for this process. Sometimes I need to start the painting the next day, or it could be a few weeks in between drawing and painting. But I need to do the painting soon; if it's too long then I lose the memory. The drawing can also hold the memory of a

colour or a smell or wind or all these things I remember when I look at the drawing. I select them intuitively. I flick through the book and I think oh, this one could be a painting. I choose the ones that hold the most poignant moment or touch me emotionally most or the ones that look a bit strange or have a bit of a strange composition. They always have to have a personal meaning to me otherwise I wouldn't be interested in taking an idea further.

I'm interested in what you say about memory and you storing the memory of colour or wind. Your drawings are black and white but your paintings are wildly colourful. I wondered if you could speak about colour and memory, or colour and emotion? Yellow is quite prominent, as are red and purple.

When I start working from drawing, the colour I'm using refers to a certain light I remember. And so all the colours I'm painting are from memory. Often I make colour notes, but the whole thing is, in a way, made up or it just holds a certain emotion I want or a certain mood or light, that's more what I'm working towards.

I love the idea of you chasing what might be strange or what also might be unfamiliar. There's a familiarity to these scenes which can feel quite domestic and intimate, but they are a bit strange because you like unusual angles or the colour might be incredibly saturated. What is the importance for you of not making the scenes literal, and yet being so attached to real life?

I think I'm much more interested in the truth of an emotional memory rather than a literal memory. I might start out with a few colours where I had made a note and then all the other colours I find with those colours until these start singing together, but it's not really about it being literal at all.

Also, when I am painting I am thinking about colour abstractly. Some of them could be an abstract painting. Often when I am painting am I holding the boards in my hands, turning them around, so I don't actually see what they are about, I often only look at what the colours do to each other.

So, your paintings also refer to painting and the act of painting and the history of painting.

I guess so, I love for example early Sienese *quattrocento* paintings. In some of my paintings I might think of Sassetta or Ambrogio Lorenzetti and I have a vague memory of their colours in my head.

What about egg tempera which is such a feisty medium - why did you decide to use it and how does it impact what the paintings are? 00:08:53

The main reason why I'm using it is that I get those luminous colours. And it dries immediately, so I can make another layer very quickly.

And I love working on boards. A carpenter friend cuts the board for me out of beautiful, well-seasoned and thick lime wood. I sand them and then I cover them with gesso. The way egg tempera sits on the gesso – I just like the sensation of that, the visual sensation, how it glows. The colour just immediately resonates and you get those finely nuanced tones. Unlike with gouache where the tones always go paler when they dry. With egg tempera they just stay the same.

And of course I think of the scale. Egg tempera dries so quickly you have to use quite a small brush. Historically we learn always that it's very difficult to do a big egg tempera painting...

Well I used to do very, very big egg tempera paintings but it was a technical difficulty. I made them two by fifty metres, or two by eighty metres, but there was the problem with the colour drying so quickly. So, then I painted in oil for a long time.

And then when did you come back to egg tempera after oil?

For about ten years I only did etching because my children were small and it just seemed a much better way to be in a studio every day for a bit. I couldn't really do that with my oil paintings because that took forever, the way I painted them.

I came back to egg tempera during the beginning of lockdown and that's when I started painting again. I had this amazing urge to go back to colour.

And then I thought of the shape of my boards. I thought - I'll cut them to be the size of my etching plates and I'll paint them on the same table. For years I had a bit of a fear of colour. I didn't know if I could in-

vent colours because I was trained at the Slade School of Fine Art and always had painted from observation. To make the jump to invented colours was a big step for me.

In a way I needed those ten years of only black and white etching and charcoal drawings in order to have a totally fresh start with colour. When I returned to painting three years ago it was such a revelation. I never stopped since.

One of the things that strikes me when you speak is your appetite to make and the frequency at which you're making. Even when you had children, you never stopped.

I never stopped, no, not even for a day. It's kind of crazy, you know, even when I gave birth, the same day I did a little scribble of the baby. I just never stopped.

For years, I just did a few drawings and then a few etchings, but every day I did something. Because I always had the feeling that I have to keep it alive, I don't want to stop. I know some women artists quit making art for years and years when they have children, but it wasn't for me.

Once you've been out in the world and paid attention and notice everything that you have seen, do you then draw on your boards, on the gesso, before you add paint or are you working really then directly with colour and with paint?

Ever since I was a student in London, I had a sentence in my mind by the painter Josef Herman...He said you've got to be absolutely accurate about the drawings you're using for your paintings. That always felt right. It's a contradiction, too – using wildly intuitive scribbles in an accurate way. But that initial placement of things is crucial to my paintings.

But then, once I have done a drawing on the board I would be very free with it and everything starts shifting.

I'm thinking about the tension in your work between what is permanent and what is passing, flexible and open to change. What led you to capture the ephemeral?

I do feel very much drawn to the fleeting moment and to live in the moment, it's just always been something

personal for me. I remember when years ago I was climbing a mountain on skis. Seeing my shadow cast and wondering weather this imprint would somehow stay as a memory on that piece of ground.

And I love poetry. So, for example, Japanese haikus, they very much are in that spirit of catching a fleeting moment, it could just be a whisper or a wind or a moonlight or whatever. When I'm painting it's about these things.

Recently, I have painted several paintings of my children in the kitchen. I ran out of space, so there's no heads or sometimes no feet or just the feet. When I look at the drawing later I often like these strange ones best.

Yes. And I love that letting go. It's almost like you just let the work guide itself. You don't have this attachment in some way to perfection.

No. And I don't want to be too forceful about things having to be perfect when I draw and paint... I like doing it most when it's just growing freely. I don't think about if it's good or bad, I just let it flow. And all I feel is an attachment to that moment which is so unique. I so much want to draw that instantly but I don't care really what the drawings look like.

I'm interested in getting things emotionally right, or getting to that essence I felt in that moment in a painting. *I hear so much wisdom in what you say. Your whole approach to art also seems like a wise approach to life - no judgement, not being attached to an outcome, letting things be as they are, and going with the flow. What a beautiful approach.*

Thanks, Wells. Also, when I'm painting I paint on several pieces at the same time and the reason why I do that is also not to get too stuck or too attached to one idea.

And what about all these books? How many decades' worth do you have? You've kept them all.

I've got them all. Oh, how many? I haven't counted them. One hundred? I have no idea, but I started it when Ena was born, my eldest daughter and she's more than 21 now.

Do you want to talk about the selection for this exhibi-

tion and how that came together?
It's all work from this year. It started in March when I was on a residency in Norway for a month and I did lots of paintings there.

Usually in the day time I went for walks in the snow, with the snowshoes, and in the evenings I painted until midnight or later. It was always the same routine but I got so much done. It was great having all that time. That was sort of the starting point and then it just went through the year.

What was the concept for this show in New York?
I didn't work with a certain concept. The concept was just to do what I always do just every day, draw and paint my daily epiphanies.

The show is titled My Yellow Room. It's after one of the titles of a work. In summer I did a ten-day long hike across the Alps in Italy and once I stayed in a very simple farm guesthouse right in the middle of nowhere. I was given a room that was all yellow. It was painted yellow like sunlight, with chalky walls that had a window overlooking the other side of the Alps of Mont Viso. After a long day's hike, it was such a treat to get this room with nice bed linen, which you usually don't get in the Alps.

And then I did lots of drawings in this yellow room because it just inspired me. The show has a few paintings from my time in that yellow room.

I gave this title to the show because there is also a connection to A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf. Being a mother of six children, I feel that need to have my own space, my own room. I think I'm a better mother when go and be in my studio for hours and then come back to be there fully for the children.

And then the last question I had is about you. Do you locate yourself in the paintings at all? Because we never see you, literally, but we get to see what you might see or imagine or remember. So, how important are you in all of it?

The main thing probably is that I am painting my very personal perception. In a way it's always my version of a certain incident. In some of the paintings I would be in there as a shadow or just from behind, just that.