



Shades of the sublime

Sarah Gillespie has simplified her working process to capture the full wonder of nature in her haunting drawings and engravings. By E Jane Dickson

Photographs by Ana Cuba

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Above, Sarah Gillespie's studio. Left, the artist on Slapton Sands in Devon. Previous pages: *Puss Moths* (*Cerura vinula*), 2016, and Gillespie with *Presence*, 2016



A

fter rain, the garden outside Sarah Gillespie's studio is busy and brilliant. Green finches are loud in the darker green of an apple tree. Clustered at the window, tomatoes, rain-enamelled, hang heavy and glamorous as pomegranates.

Inside, propped on a mammoth Victorian easel, a parallel world is presented in black and white. *Deep Lane* is a large-scale work in charcoal; it is a drawing, but the effect, when you stand before it, is profoundly painterly. The darks are resonant, the light a remarkable incident. Tone, depth and intention – the picture is packed with intention – are built on the graphic binary of mark/no mark.

Gillespie prefers to work in winter. 'I struggle in the summer, to be inspired. I find all the green overwhelming,' she says. Seven years ago, she renounced colour altogether. 'I painted in oils for years, but I simply couldn't continue. There are just so many choices with oil paint, so many artifices and tricks. You've got to mix your colours, get the tone right, choose the right brush – all those endless, endless choices. It was making me ill.'

Working in charcoal offered a purer process ('it's carbon, the matter of life') and a kind of ascetic clarity. 'It was that whole idea of abstaining in order to move forward,' Gillespie explains, 'of stilling yourself so that things can presence themselves to you. And it felt like an immense relief, a really happy thing.'

A solo show at Beaux Arts London brings together Gillespie's deeply meditative landscapes in charcoal and mezzotint alongside drawings and drypoint engravings of insects so vividly 'presented' that they seem three-dimensional; the hairs on a

fuzzy bee's back, the dust shimmered from wings of moths rendered with such fidelity that it's all you can do not to reach out and stroke them. Each piece rewards hours, if not days, of looking.

In a flickering, digital age, Gillespie says, we have lost the habit of visual attention. 'We look too quickly. We're used to backlit screens – to the detriment of everything.' Worse, she argues, we have become used to the idea of art-as-service; something to be consumed rather than something we commit to.

Her own commitment is total. Born in Farnham, she served her apprenticeship, aged 17, at the Atelier Neo Medici in Paris, learning the arcana of Renaissance painting techniques and pigments, then went on to read history of art at Oxford. Internalising Cennini's advice to artists on 'painting various kinds of beards and hair in fresco' may or may not have come in handy, but the 15th-century master's prescribed qualities of Enthusiasm, Reverence, Obedience and Constancy have stayed with Gillespie. At 53, married with a grown-up son and daughter, she is warm and rather wise, full of good sense on everything from Brexit to the future of grammar schools. Still, though, in her dress – a severe black smock – and in her passion, there are flashes of the postulant.

'We're very frightened of submission, nowadays, because it gets abused,' she says. 'We – by which I mean white Westerners – don't kneel any more, we don't bow. All those things that acknowledge something greater than ourselves, we've left so much of that behind. But when you're drawing, particularly when you're drawing outside, you have to do a little »





bit of that. Of course you bring your discipline and your skills and your knowledge, but you do have to make a sort of bow to what's out there.'

Solitude is also important. Gillespie's timber-framed studio, built by her husband, is a matter of yards from the family kitchen, but this is emphatically one person's space; poetry (Raine, Heaney, Rilke) and music (Bach, Miles Davis) are her company. When she walks to find - or be found by - inspiration, she walks alone.

'I was a solitary child. I did not play well with others. It's not painful - I don't want to sound sad - it's just that habit of solitude. If you're out there seeking "moments of perception", they're not necessarily going to come to you, but when they do happen, they happen when you're on your own.'

Much of Gillespie's new work features Slapton Ley, a wildlife reserve on the South Devon coast. 'It's a freshwater lake, but the sea is just over the long shingle bank at Slapton Sands, so there's almost an excess of light. It endlessly fascinates me.'

The Way the Heart Weeps is an extraordinary study of a reed bed, a ghostly grove of refracted and refulgent light. The allusive title is arresting, but Gillespie shies from 'the whole art-as-biography thing', talking more easily of darks and brights than of emotions (perhaps these are the same thing). 'If you've ever stood in one of those reed beds, they're very pale places,' she says. 'I wanted to see if I could make a drawing that had that element of light as an eminence rather than light falling on something.'

Swan, a solitary bird on a dark flood, raises any number of echoes and associations, but is subject to the same rigour. 'The piece isn't really about a swan,' she explains, 'it's about evening, about the way »



Below, *Tidal Reaches*, 2015. Opposite, copper plates in the studio

and Slapton Sands. Previous pages, *Swan*, 2016



'If you're seeking moments of perception, they happen when you're on your own'



Opposite, *Deep Lane*, 2016. This page, from top: a charcoal pencil;

Slapton Ley wildlife reserve; a postcard of an earlier work



darkness arrives on the landscape. I wanted the back of the swan to be the lightest thing on the page.'

A large landscape can take three months of looking, absorbing and recording, stroke by hair's-breadth stroke. The result is a pin-sharp image that, in reproduction at least, might be mistaken for photography. 'I've been described as a photo-realist, and I smarted,' says Gillespie. 'I thought: put a photograph next to my pieces and then tell me that.' She offers 'verism' as an approximation to her style, but admits that this hardly covers the metaphysical intention of her drawings (she is deeply affected by Taoist ideas of absence and presence). And if her work presents a technical conundrum to the viewer, technique, for the artist, has long been sublimated.

'If you asked a 53-year-old ballerina how they do a pirouette, they couldn't tell you, because it is ever-developing. I don't think of what I do as technical. Lots of people can draw - it's more about concentration. You stop in front of what entices you. You work, and your attention separates elements to analyse them. And in this process of taking things apart, all the grandiose stuff that goes on in our heads - Who am I? What do I want to express? What is my style? - is silenced. The separate elements come together and you see the entirety.' Finishing the drawings is as much about listening as looking. 'They tell you when they're done. They don't tell you to stop, but they stop telling you what to do.'

Gillespie's ear is less attuned to commercial buzz. Her work has become highly collectable; the Duke of Devonshire is a frequent buyer, and Damien Hirst bought two pieces at last year's Beaux Arts show. But she views her success as special grace: 'Drawing isn't cool. There's a hierarchy in the art market - oil painting is at the top, drawing is below watercolour, and the only thing that comes below drawing is print-making.' She also has a strictly qualified interest in putting herself 'out there', as she describes it. 'There's a big pressure now on artists, through social media, to show something of your personal life,' she says. 'Obviously, you've got to put yourself in broadcast mode when you show your work, but when you're in broadcast mode all the time, you're too conscious of the regard of others. You put a sketch up every day on Instagram, and you may get 200 people going "Wow, that's fabulous". That could be more destructive than useful, because it may not be fabulous.' Pressure to join the online commentariat is equally resisted: she sees no benefit in 'responding as an artist' to every news item and quotes the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: 'What place poetry in time of disaster?'

The clamorous green world can wait. For Gillespie, engagement is most properly expressed in patient consideration of the paper before her. Mark versus no mark. Truth in black and white. ♦ *'Sarah Gillespie, New Work' is at Beaux Arts London until 4 March. www.beauxartslondon.uk*