



A Mini adventure

Sarah Moncrieff

Photographs: Mark Hemsworth

Julie Webb finds out why the Cowley car plant has inspired artist Sarah Moncrieff's Artweeks exhibition

Woodstock artist Sarah Moncrieff used to pass the Cowley motor works – the subject of several of the paintings in her Artweeks exhibition – every day, as she went to school in Oxford from her family's home in Littlemore.

"It is a place I have been familiar with for a long time," she said. "I am quite curious about what is on my doorstep – the little places tucked away that we like to ignore. They are what motivate me and stimulate me."

"My interest in the urban scene started in Coventry, which was a city encircled by a ring road," Sarah said. "I worked in an advice centre in an area that received a lot of bad press – for example, it was listed by the Daily Mail as one of the ten worst places to live – but the folks who ran the centre were such positive people I decided to try to counteract this image by painting the road and some of the buildings."

She chooses places that are superficially ugly or bland, and extracts the elements that enable the viewer to appreciate them as dramatic, thought-provoking and visually appealing.

"I am interested in the way artists take visual information and process and edit it. For example, if I were going to paint my garden I would not paint the million leaves I see – it is

not possible to paint it all.

She works in oils, with a very limited palette these days – blues, greys and white feature heavily – and her paintings are characterised by contrast and a sort of sombre sweeping energy which is hard to describe but very distinctive.

"I do not have figures in my work – that gives it a kind of loneliness, or eeriness" she said.

Amongst the artists who have influenced her approach to painting are Frank Auerbach, his teacher at Borough Polytechnic David Bomberg, and his fellow-student Leon Kossoff, whose dramatic London cityscapes she much admires.

"Also a contemporary painter of very vigorous landscapes, David Tress, and the Welsh artist who died a few years ago, Peter Prendergast. I like his work very much."

A student at Oxford High School, and then Gosford Hill sixth form, Sarah did not come from a particularly artistic family but, like so many other Artweeks exhibitors, has been painting, drawing and making things as long as she can remember.

She also learnt to knit as a very young child and now produces her own range of knitwear designs, inspired by the colours and patterns of the natural world.



Continued on page 18



Sarah Moncrieff's painting of an interior at the Cowley car plant

On the walls of her cottage kitchen and conservatory hang two large paintings, part of a series, inspired by port and cement works sites in Dakar, Senegal

From page 17

It was a while, however, before she began to give serious attention to art as an alternative career.

"In my early 30s I was working part-time as a solicitor in Oxford and decided to enrol for a degree in Fine Art, the first two years part-time and the final year full-time. I studied at Banbury because they had some very keen painting tutors there – I was not so interested in the conceptual stuff."

Since then she has been able to combine teaching adult art classes in Woodstock and Summertown with her own creative work.

Past subjects have included Ardley rubbish tip, the old cement works near Shipton, a tyre dump, and Didcot Power Station.

"I was also very interested in Broadmoor, which I used to visit quite a lot when I was practising as a solicitor. Unless you were specifically going to it you would not know it was there, because it is hidden away on top of a hill and the hill has been forested. It is a sad place – people are there for a long time."

Sarah's painting of the gates of the old Victorian institution at the centre of the modern cluster of buildings, which conveys this sadness rather movingly I thought, was bought by the Broadmoor Hospital Trust in 2013.

On the walls of her cottage kitchen and conservatory hang two large paintings, part of a series, inspired by port and cement works sites in Dakar, Senegal.

"I was in an art gallery in Amsterdam and

saw a photo project by a street boy at a centre run by a Senegalese charity, *l'Empire des Enfants*.

"There is a very specific problem to do with the tradition of families sending boys to religious schools because they think they will get a good education, but they are then sent out to beg by the people who run them. The centre tries to take them back to their families and educate the parents about the dangers.

"I was going to Senegal because my brother was living there, so I got in touch with them. I have been teaching art workshops at the centre for more than five years now," Sarah said.

"The boys are amazing: they take to it immediately and really want the opportunity to try as many things as they can – they like using everything I bring them, and when they get into a project, a big collage for example, they

love mixing up colour and making the whole thing their own. When they are really, really into it they will start singing – that is when I know they are happy."

Back at home, much of her time recently has been devoted to the painting that has resulted from visits to observe and draw the car factory.

She said: "I found the Mini building and the production line really interesting. When you look at the ceiling you see all sorts of horizontal and vertical lines criss-crossing, and then you have the circular thing of all these parts of the car being made at various stages and moving round very slowly.

"All the different shapes and different lines seem quite chaotic, so you think 'What can I select that will give the essence of the interior of the plant as I would like to portray it?'"

"Construction sites appeal to me for the same reason. I did several paintings from sketches I made when the new John Radcliffe Children's Hospital was being built."

Sarah has also painted some of the city's better-known places – Balliol, Trinity and Oriol colleges, and the city skyline in many different moods. These pictures will be on sale alongside her Cowley plant canvases at the Artweeks show.

■ Sarah Moncrieff's Artweeks exhibition runs from May 17-24 at Ewert House, Ewert Place, Banbury Road, Summertown OX2 7DD. Open Monday-Thursday 11am-6pm, Friday and Saturday 11am-4.30pm, Sunday 11am-1.30pm. For more information visit the website: www.sarahmoncrieffpaintings.co.uk