

Algae on a harbour wall glows bottle green under water. Sunlight flickers on crumbling masonry, illuminating the pastel colours of old paintwork . Virginia Creeper, ripped from a wall, leaves behind a stencil, a stain, ragged blobs of crimson on faded bricks. These are images painter Rhonda Whitehead notes with her camera on visits to Rome, Venice, Paris, Cambridge, Cornwall, Istanbul. Exquisite, subtle details recorded in photographs are gradually worked from, on sized paper and finally scaled up to larger paintings using oil and mixed media on 5x4ft canvases.

A sense of place is intrinsic in the work of the painter. Extensive travels have informed phases of work such as the Rock Series. Red earth scoured by wind and sun at Uluru was a searing contrast to the earlier Water Series, inspired by the cool depths of dyke and river local to her present home in Norfolk.

Living in East Anglia, the artist formed an intimate relationship with the landscape, painting the very land she helped save in a local environmental campaign. She scanned the intensive agricultural landscape, from the aerial viewpoint of repeat patterns described by giant ploughs or drills to the sunlit, wind-whipped, iced or choked water of the Broads (Norfolk and Suffolk's extensive peat excavations, flooded as sea levels rose). Concerns of water quality and bio-diversity are contained within impressions of pondweed, water lilies and reflections.

Recent paintings are preoccupied with nature's effect on the built environment, describing a natural palimpsest. Organisms repossess the architecture. Walls may proliferate with moss or algae, or erode under the effects of oxygen, light, rain, and wind. Life

forms create a palette sometimes indistinguishable from the patina of damaged paintwork. Scuffs, scrapings and pockmarks bloom with layers of colour. The story of civilised pride and pomp and practicality, of stucco, brickwork, painted layers, is rewritten. The painting *Blue Istanbul* emerged from the interior wall of a building that had been knocked down. *Kings, Cambridge* comes from an exterior North wall in the corner of one of Cambridge's most famous forecourts. Cosmetic blemishes become time's graffiti. The artist's eye sees detail that rings with life as buildings crumble.

Rhonda Whitehead builds them up again with her own 'stucco' mix using sand and wax with paint as she creates texture on her canvases. Working on them sometimes for up to a year in a vigorous physical process of overlaying and scraping away, she creates ambiguity between form and light, nature and architecture. The images attain a dynamic beyond the constraints of the square canvas form.

Through the control of light and colour she succeeds in making static canvases resonate and change aspect under a concentrated gaze.

Whitehead's finely considered paintings are about moment as well as form and construction. Compare the architecture of a moment such as evening sunlight on a dark wall, or ripples of water reflected on a bridge to a butterfly flying past. The shimmer of a butterfly wing is a delicate, ephemeral moment where light creates colour. But, like every painting in Whitehead's collection at Highgate Fine Art, each cell of that wing is an infinitely complex and robust creation.

Jo Sinclair