



## MEET THE ARTIST: Sue Smith



Abingdon's Sue Smith is the winner of the 2023 Artweeks Mary Moser Award, an annual award intended to help develop the career of a professional artist who has taken up art as a second career later in life. Artweeks Festival Director Esther Lafferty visited her to find out more about her art and her inspiration.

“My drawings are how I express my feelings about the world

Until recently, Sue spent many years as a front-line worker helping vulnerable adults, the homeless and refugees, getting and keeping roofs over their heads and supporting people to have a voice wherever she could.

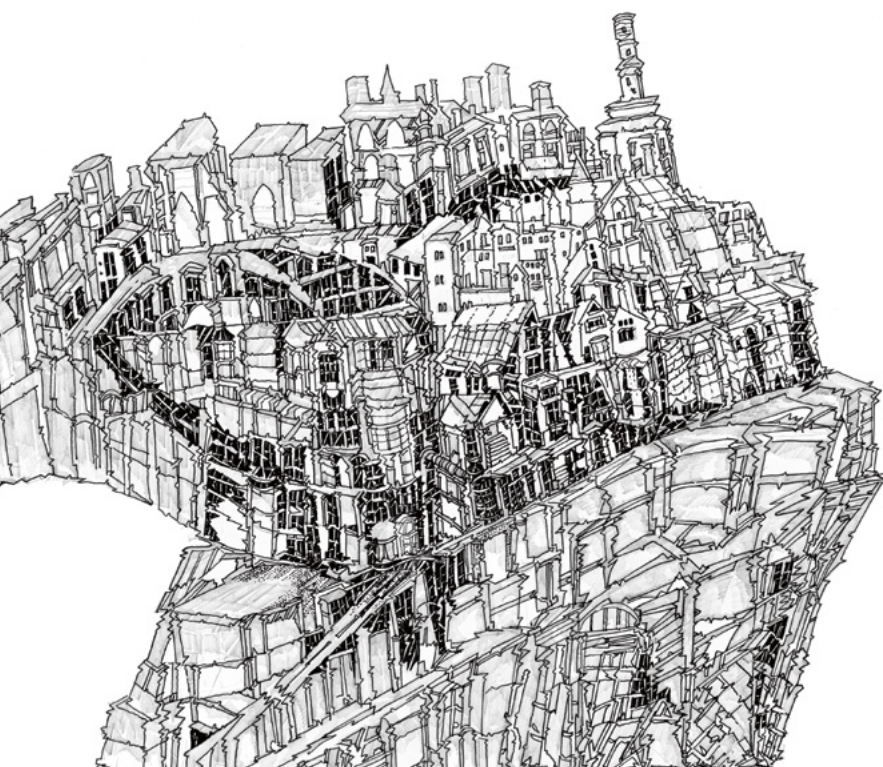
“I always cared desperately about the people I was helping and it was hard to accept that it is impossible to help everyone,” says Sue. “I had begun to feel that it was beginning to unravel me around the edges. I was part of a pilot scheme supporting medical staff on best practice

for working with the vulnerable and those with insecure housing during stays in hospital, and when it came to an end, I decided it was time for a change of direction. I decided to focus on drawing.

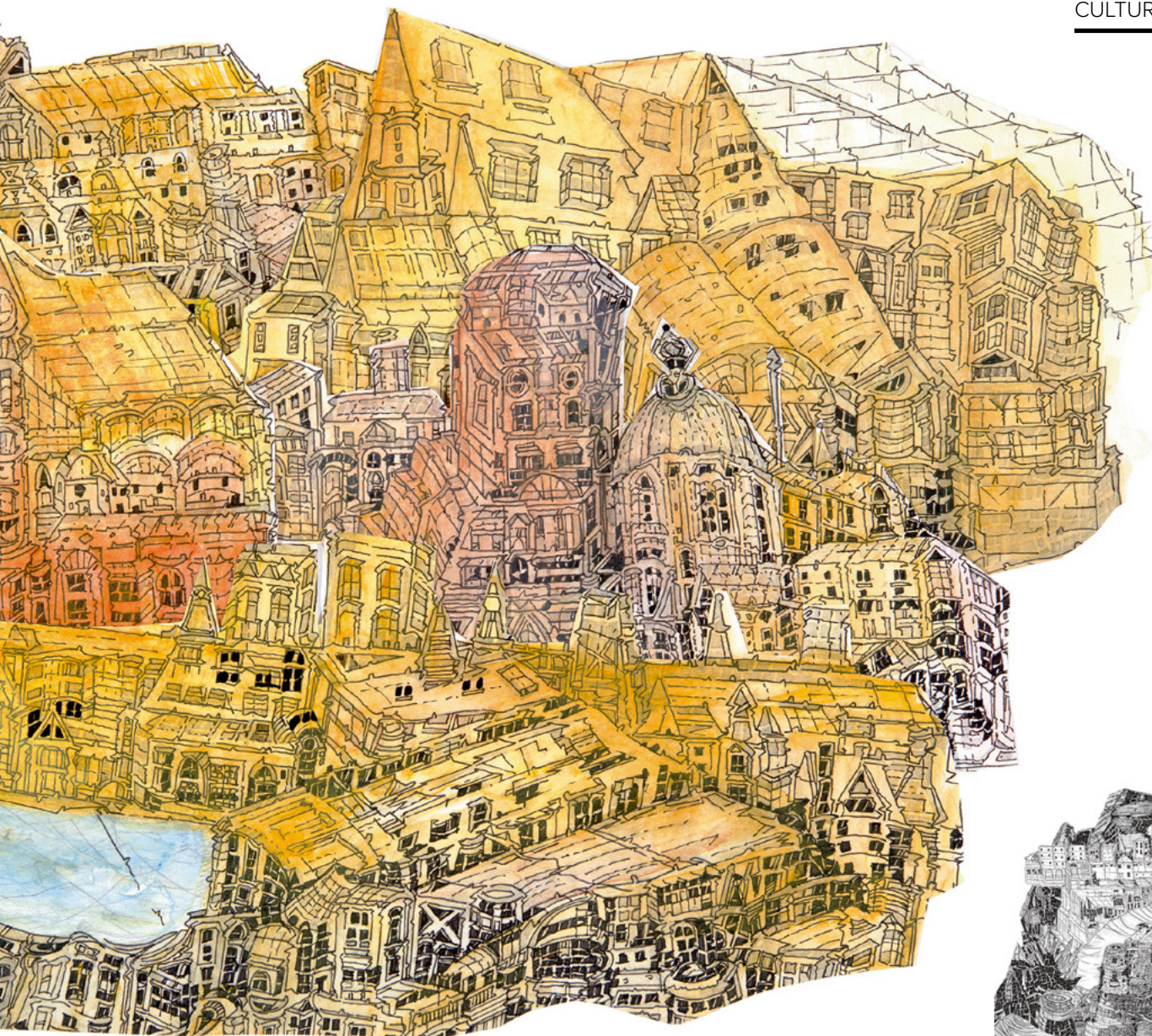
I had always doodled – in meetings for example – as I found it helped me keep my mind focused on the matters in hand and then a few years ago I began to draw at home too,” she explains. “I found it was a wonderful escape and I could get completely lost in my drawings. As I put pen to paper, it was as if I was clearing my mind by transferring deep-rooted issues around security, emotions and even frustrations into art.”

Sue draws expansive energetic cityscapes primarily in pen and ink in which hundreds of houses and buildings line the streets. Although you can't see people in the pictures, you can sense the humanity. Each urban landscape is an impressive vista from nowhere in particular, inspired by buildings from around the world but perhaps most influenced by Middle-Eastern architecture and the places that Sue, entranced by their archaeology and history, would most love to visit.

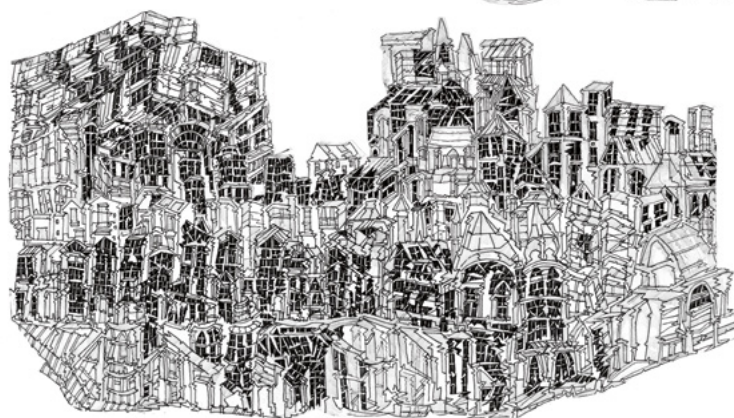
Sue takes a non-conformist approach to perspective which pulls the viewer's eye right







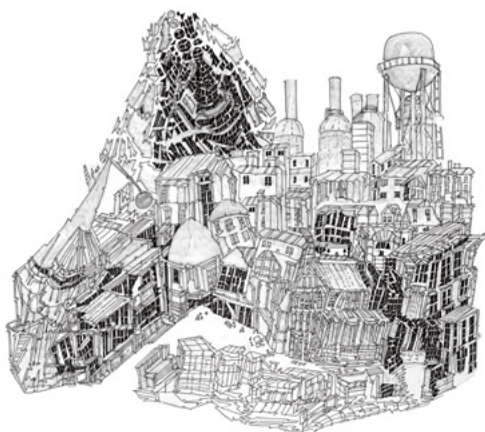
into the picture. “My intention is that people will stop and really look at the detail of my work,” she says. “With these pieces, I want people to step away from the run-of-the-mill thinking and let their minds run amok. Our brains don’t think in a linear way, and they can process multiple perspectives at once and that’s what I’m trying to encourage. While drawn from real life emotions and places, for the viewer they’re a distraction, a break from everyday existence. I include some blank spaces in some of my pieces as if to provide a spot in which to rest and catch your breath. It’s interesting that different people see different things in each: just as in real life, not everybody sees the big picture in the same way. On top of the main theme, I also often add the occasional little touch of other things, too. I’ll catch something transient and pin it down on paper: a flower, a moment of humour or intrigue from the news, or something I’ve seen locally. I once saw a boat half-submerged in the river in Abingdon and it stuck in my mind so I popped



into one of my drawings,” she smiles. “I’m also mad about football so look out for a stadium and a football flying high from within it.”

Representing the state of society as Sue sees it; if you peer more closely, and dig deeper into the stories of each drawing, however, you’ll understand they are more dystopic than they first appear. Her architectural forms are ►





drawn with jagged lines to give an edgy other-worldliness and the undefined edges which add a sense of dynamism hint at a story that is still unresolved. Larger pictures are made up from several smaller drawings, built up like the quarters of a city or chapters of life.

"All of my pictures begin from a concept of security, whether that's getting it, losing it or the threat of it. My whole career I have seen how losing security affects people, and in my cityscapes, that security is represented as buildings: having walls around you offers, in most cases, a place of safety, an idea of home. The idea of being wrapped in something warm and comforting, whether that's love, a blanket, or bricks and mortar, is comforting. For the lucky majority of us in this country, however bad our day has been, we have somewhere to go where we can close the door behind us when we get home and shut out the rest of the world for the evening. Many people here and around the world however don't have that luxury. Their environment is never safe or secure. I found that I can't separate my art from these issues that have always concerned and motivated me, so they underpin most of my work. My drawings are how I express my feelings about the world and the latest news stories from the Covid pandemic to the situation in Ukraine. Each is a response to the trauma and distress of places in conflict or other issues like climate change that challenge the human spirit," she explains. However, while Sue's drawings are metaphors for insecurity, destruction, and vulnerability, her art is not dark or melancholic. "I'd like to think my cityscapes offer hope," she says. Her drawings are like three dimensional maps on the page, "and," she continues, "if there's a map, then there's a way out. We can all help someone to find it."

You can follow Sue on Instagram (@McShoeSue) and you will be able to see her work in St John the Evangelist Cloister Gallery, Iffley Road, Oxford during Oxfordshire Artweeks in May (venue 367) alongside art by other artists and an exhibition of many artist-postcards which are being auctioned to raise funds for Sobell House Hospice, where Sue was once a volunteer.



*Adam Jacot*

## The Toponymist

Have you ever stopped to think why our towns and villages are so named? This fascination falls under the subject linguists call toponymy: 'the study of place names'

Place names have long been a source of fascination for me. Some I know were a deliberate creation by our ancestors while some evolved naturally over time. The definitions are very often, and very obviously, a matter of natural or geographic origin. For example, we find much Old English as the basis of our names with for hill ('beorg', 'dun' or 'hyll' for a hill, 'cnoll' for a hill-top, 'clif' for a cliff, slope or bank); or for water ('broc' for a brook or stream, 'wella' for a spring or stream, 'burna' for a stream, 'ea' for a river).

The 'don' part of Abingdon is from 'dun' above while the 'Abing' part comes very unusually from the name of a woman: in this instance 'Aebba'. Little is known about her but also of note is that 'Abbandune' as it was first known was recorded as early as 968: so very early indeed.

As for neighbouring Clifton Hampden, a village possessing the only major bridge that Sir George Gilbert Scott designed, it started as 'Cliftona' in 1146 before becoming 'Clypton' and actually derives from 'clif-tun' meaning 'the farmstead on or by a bank of land'. 'Hampden', as an addition, is beguiling especially as there's no other 'Clifton'. Nearby is a hamlet called Burcot, a few hundred yards from the Thames, and close to Dorchester. Most likely it's a derivation from 'Bryda's cottages' and, while it has neither a shop nor a church, nonetheless it is home to 'The Chequers Inn' which is among the oldest names, going back to Roman times, for a pub. This name refers to a chequer board which was hung outside as a sign that there was a place within where the game could be played. Later the same sign was erected to demonstrate that it was a place for a moneylender and hence has come our parliamentary word 'exchequer'.

Adam Jacot de Boinod was a researcher for the first BBC television series *QI*, hosted by Stephen Fry. He wrote *The Meaning of Tingo and Other Extraordinary Words from around the World*, published by Penguin Books.