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Seeing The Sea

This month, Artweeks' artist Alison Berrett is holding her first solo exhibition for nearly a decade in the RonaPainting Gallery in Jericho. Here, she talks to Esther Lafferty about the draw of the sea which has inspired much of the work on show. ▶





“I am fascinated by our relationship with the natural world and its effects on our mental, physical and spiritual selves,” Alison says. “I get excited by dramatic landscapes and the power of natural elements like weather and light. Living in Oxfordshire, I am surrounded by expansive skies and space with the beautiful Cotswold landscape nearby and I love it. However, I grew up by the coast and I regularly need to be near the sea, so I also go to favourite destinations – usually Devon and Cornwall – to draw and paint.”

She goes on to explain that the north coast of Cornwall is one of her favourite spots; “I love its wild and craggy coastal walks. There’s something great about being high above the sea as you watch it crashing below then draining away. We have a camper van, and we park up at the far end of Woolacombe Beach in Devon and walk down through the dunes, cooking tea and watching the sun go down. The light at dawn and dusk is especially magical as the colours in the sky change so fast, adding a mysterious glow. I draw on the beach, travelling light – I just take a sketchbook or paper and a set of pastels as they’re great for both mark-making and capturing colour very quickly. I use Unison Pastels which are highly pigmented, and you can also use them to paint with by adding a little water, so I’m able to both draw and paint in situ with very little equipment. I work intuitively, capturing the colour, movement and energy of what I am seeing, hearing and feeling. The process of drawing on-site fixes the experience in my body and memory and when I come back to my studio I gather this collection of drawings and upon opening my sketchbooks always feel a thrill of excitement as the memories flood back.”



Above:
Scuba Dive -
Pastels on Paper,
21x30cm



Left:
'A Haven for Precious
Gems' Oil on Canvas
80x80cm

The resulting works on show in this exhibition – in oil, acrylic and pastels and in a range of sizes – are powerful, honest and dynamic depictions of the sea; abstracts with dancing marks, gestures and swirls. Their movement and energy evoke the emotions we all feel at the coast.

“I have so many questions about our connection with the sea,” Alison continues. “Why do we crave a trip to the coast? Is it the wide-open space or the freedom we feel at the beach or on a cliff-top path? Is it the power, the

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passion and the wildness of the waves and the relentless movement of the water that calls to us? Does that timeless natural energy resonate with some deep human instinct and take us back to our roots? There’s an excitement that comes with the stormy seas and wild weather and yet where there’s water, there’s fear too. The coast is a perilous place to be and when I am drawing by the sea it’s almost as if I am playing with danger! I’m rather in awe of the sea’s might. In my artwork, I am particularly interested in places and moments where you find contrast: the sea embodies contrast as the tide ebbs and flows, and whilst it’s always moving there are moments of stillness between waves. And, it can be crashing or completely calm but it’s the tempestuous tides that especially captivate me.

Also, if you look closely at the sea, there is incredible contrast in the colours of the water. It is different from place to place but is also changeable due to the light and weather. The breadth and strength of colour in the natural world is amazing and in the sea, it’s surprising how many shades you can see all at once from azure and teal to slate grey. As the light



Top Left:
Surrender to the
Undertow - Pastels on
Paper 56.5cm x 76cm

Top Right:
Am I Brave Enough -
Pastels on Paper
50 x 70.5cm

Above:
'Though the Storm
Rages, I Am Safe'
Oil on Canvas 50x100cm

shines through the tips of the wave there’ll be translucent turquoise while below there might be a dark midnight blue that makes you curious about the depth of the water and what’s below. And then there’ll be a flash of something unexpected: a circle or a streak of emerald or orange, bright pink or coral as something flies over, moves across or reflects in the water.”

By including these fleeting changes in the view in her pieces, Alison captures and depicts a short period of time, almost like photographs taken with a long exposure. She highlights the contrast between the permanence of the sea and its ever-changing energy and movement.

And the exuberance and passion of the sea in this exhibition could be a metaphor for a new chapter in Alison’s own life. After many years working with the Art Room charity where she used art to support children and young people’s wellbeing and mental health, Alison is now pouring all her energy into her own art, diving into being a full-time artist, “which is where I’ve been aiming to get to for the whole of my life,” she smiles, “and now, finally, I’m in a new phase of life, post-teaching and with grown-up children, it’s thrilling to finally be here.”

You can see more on Alison, her seascapes and landscapes too, at alisonberrettartist.com