

jessica cooper essays

interview by Alex Wade
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"I loved London, its sense of anonymity and the hard slog that goes with being there. But I couldn't live there for long. I just couldn't be away from the sea. Cornwall called me back."

So says Jessica Cooper, one of Cornwall's most popular artists, as she casts her mind back to the early days of her career. We're talking in the light, airy and decidedly well organised kitchen of the former St Just foundry which is home to Cooper, her husband Ben and children Jacob, 16, and Lotte, nine. Articulate and measured, Cooper is at her most impassioned when the conversation turns to the sea. To what extent does her relationship with the ocean define her?

At first blush, Cooper's answer is quixotic. "I'm quite a loner and I need space," she says, admitting that this need makes for a curious juxtaposition with being a professional artist. She elaborates that "It's ironic, really, because in painting you need people, you have to have an audience, while my relationship with the sea is about solitude," and wonders whether she might be something of a mixture, the introvert jostling with the extrovert.

But regardless, the sea is everything to Cooper. Her chief passion for the past five years – surfing – sees her in the water at her nearest break, Sennen Cove, whenever the surf is up. "I love the time alone that surfing gives me," she explains. "You don't have to answer to anyone." So, too, is surfing's physicality important: "Surfing provides me with a constant challenge," she says. "It means that I'm always pushing myself."

Cooper came to surfing later in life. She was at a party hosted by West Penwith surfboard shaper Rich Hawkins and tried out a mountain board. Another of West Penwith's long-time surfers, Jonty Henshall, witnessed her exploits and was impressed by her natural balance. "Jonty told me I should try surfing," recalls Cooper, smiling at the memory. The notion of surfing lodged in her

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mind and later, on holiday in France with the Hawkins family, she had a go. "I was hooked immediately," she says. "I loved it and haven't looked back since." Cooper is now the proud owner of two shortboards shaped by Hawkins, and is collaborating with him in a Newlyn Society of Artists' project which will see the pair write a book about the way in which the sea has influenced their lives.

For Cooper, brought up in Cornwall since the age of one, the sea has always been crucial, whether she is riding its waves, swimming in it or merely looking at it. Her parents settled in Trevowan, near Morvah, in 1968, and the raw, elemental feel to the landscape here – where granite outcrops on ancient moorland sweep down to the ever-restless Atlantic – cannot but have moulded Cooper's sensibility. After attending schools in Penzance and Truro, she completed her Foundation Course at Falmouth School of Art. Then came her London stint, as Cooper took a degree in Fine Art and Textiles at Goldsmiths College, graduating in 1989. Throughout, the sea was always present, memories of wild beaches such as Portheras, her childhood haunt, informing the development of her work and ultimately guiding her back to Cornwall.

"I was fortunate in being able to work as a professional artist as soon as I graduated," she tells me. "My father rented a gallery space in Bread Street in Penzance to see how I'd get on in exhibiting work from my degree. I was only too happy to come back to Cornwall and see what happened." What happened was unequivocal success, as Cooper's debut show not only sold out but was critically acclaimed. However, early success was not without its downside. After a few years, Cooper suffered a degree of artistic burn out and needed a break. She solved this with characteristic energy, plunging into teaching adults with learning difficulties and juggling various freelance teaching commitments.

To fast forward 20 years is to meet an engaging, open woman who, having returned to the artistic fray in earnest in the past 10 years, has created a unique body of work with legions of admirers. Cooper is known nationally, with regular shows at the Edgar Modern Gallery in Bath, the Hart Gallery in London, the Stour Gallery in Warwickshire and Badcock's in Newlyn. She also sells through her old friend Demelza Prettejohn's Beyond the Sea Gallery in Padstow, but when we meet she is in the midst of creating work for her forthcoming Badcock's show, 'Eclectic and the Sea'.

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A tour of her studio is to encounter a series of hauntingly austere, paired down images for Eclectic and the Sea. Cooper's canvases are denuded of anything resembling excess as she seeks to distil her instinctive response to objects she finds, whether they be isolated trees or the houses above Gwenver beach. Often there are motifs of domesticity – strawberries in a bowl, for example, or images of mugs, dishes and cups – for to Cooper such objects ask of the viewer as much as they reveal. As she puts it: "I strive for an uncluttered simplicity that leaves much for the audience to read between the lines. Through the deceptive simplicity of mark, colour and composition I shift the viewer's perception of everyday objects and experiences and encourage them to find the one thing that is significant to them."

A painting of four poppies is especially resonant. "I saw them looking bedraggled in the rain and brought them inside. In painting them the last thing I was thinking about was plotting and mapping. Instead, I thought of my family, with each poppy representing one of the four of us." Painting is thus for Cooper a deeply intimate act, and, moreover, one without which she couldn't function. "Painting is an extension of me. It's like surfing – if I don't paint or surf for a few days I start going a bit mad." Just as important is writing, for Cooper writes in her sketchbooks as much as she draws. She enthuses about existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and the American 'surf noir' writer Kem Nunn. "Tapping the Source and The Dogs of Winter are brilliant," she says. "After having Jacob I didn't read for a while but Kem Nunn got me back into reading. And now I find that I need to write as much as paint and surf."

Many people would find it impossible to find the time to be so passionately involved in activities at once cerebral and physical, at the same time as being a wife and mother. But Cooper's energy, resourcefulness and sense of self-belief is as embedded as her paintings are fresh, vibrant and beautiful. And as I'm reflecting, with our chat coming to an end, that this is one artist who makes multi-tasking look easy, Cooper is on the move. "There's good surf," she says. "I can't wait to get in the water."