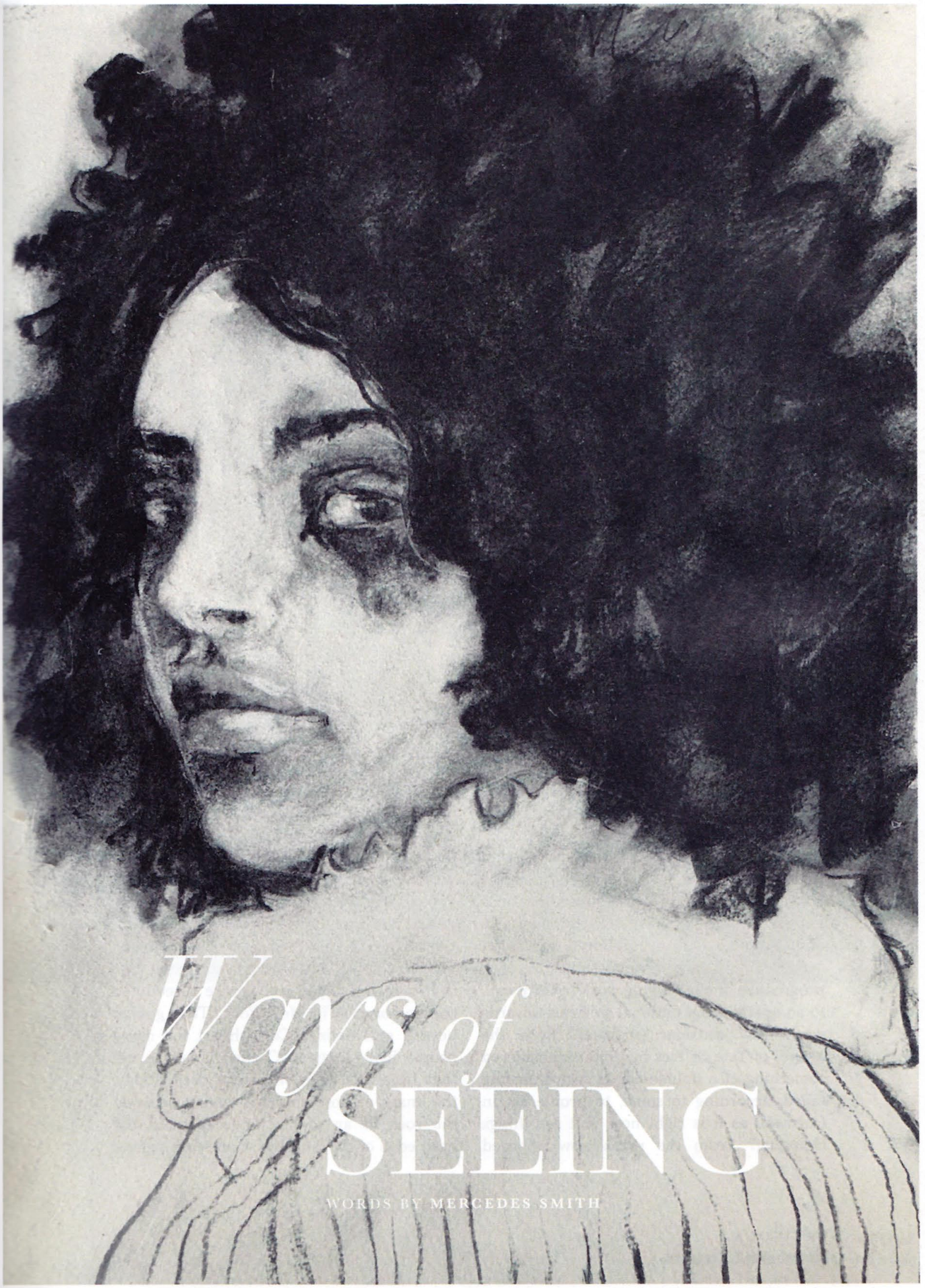


Ways of SEEING

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH

Despite being a long-established area for the fine arts, Cornwall's remoteness from London and other urban art centres has worked against the visibility of its resident artists. But are things changing?

As a writer and publicist for art in Cornwall, I can tell you that attracting the attention of national newspapers and magazines, or persuading art critics to make the journey from London to Cornwall to see a show is an endless uphill battle. "It takes a committed gallerist or arts writer to travel west for six hours based on your Instagram feed or invite," says multimedia artist and Newlyn School of Art tutor Dan Pyne, "it's not like popping across to a Peckham warehouse show on a hunch." Artists here will tell you they face numerous hurdles to building a successful career, from a lack of opportunity to show progressive or challenging work in Cornwall, to an apathy from national galleries towards work they consider 'regional'. Even the arrival of Tate St Ives in 1993 is considered something of a double-edged sword, having failed, according to some, to profile art in Cornwall as it is right now. But are things changing? From the reach now afforded to artists by the internet, to new private investment in Cornwall, to the emergence of open art shows nationally, is there a sea change on the horizon for the visibility of contemporary Cornish art?

"Everyone is so familiar with the narrative of art in Cornwall," says Dan. "We used to be connected – Victorian artists came here in the 1800s, establishing colonies and sending work back to London for exhibition. When Modernist artists moved here to escape the war, Cornwall drew the gaze of the art world even more, and the art made here in the 50s and 60s was so strong that it bypassed London and spoke directly to contemporaries in New York. That golden heyday still defines Cornish art for many people living outside Cornwall, but to me that feels like a vision of the past. Today, the image of Cornish art is caught between the rock of an idyllic landscape and the hard edge of the Modernist museum's glass.

PREVIOUS
'Raven' – Shelly Tregoning

ABOVE
Artist Maxwell Steel at his Cornwall studio

ABOVE
'Breaking Glass' – Shelly Tregoning

ABOVE
'The Mixer' – black pigment on canvas – Maxwell Steele

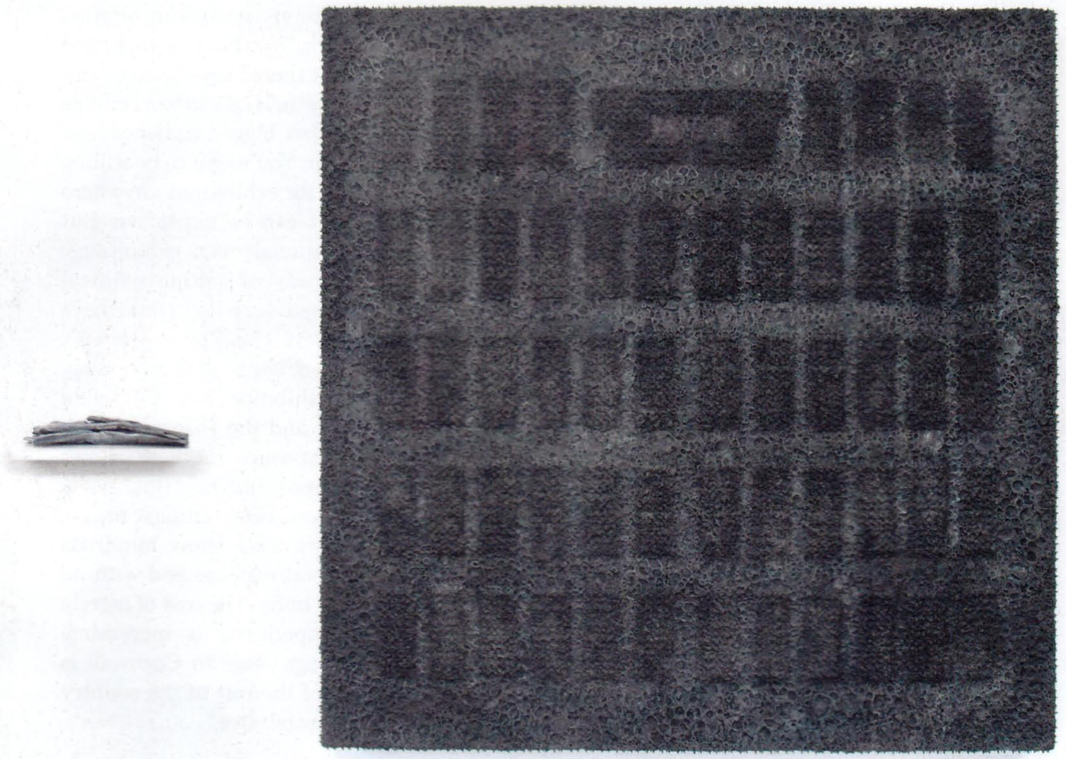
ABOVE
'Tethered' – Trudy Montgomery

This may be a provocative thing to say, but I think Tate St Ives, as wonderful as it is, does contemporary Cornish art a disservice. Their standing collection preserves that supposed 'golden age' of Cornish art in aspic, and it doesn't reflect what is actually happening here now. The last show of contemporary Cornish art that Tate mounted was in 2007 – that's 15 years ago. If the public art galleries in Cornwall never reflect its contemporary face, how will anyone outside the county know it exists?"

Cornwall's private gallery scene, too, is often accused of failing to invest in truly progressive Cornish art, favoring instead the more accessible works that sell to seasonal visitors. Artist Shelly Tregoning, for example, studied Fine Art at Falmouth, lives and paints in West Cornwall, and is building a successful art career – but entirely outside of Cornwall, by necessity rather than choice. "I make work here but show exclusively out of the county," she says. "Cornwall is certainly recognised as a place where artists live and work – you can't throw a paper dart here without hitting an aggregation of chattering artists – but being recognised nationally as 'relevant' is, I think, much more difficult." Shelly was offered her first solo show, perhaps the most important moment of a rising artist's career, not in Cornwall but in Edinburgh, 600 miles from her Helston studio. The few shows she has held in Cornwall, she has arranged herself because "there is still a lack of galleries in this county where young and challenging artists can show their work'.

Dan supports this opinion, telling me: "there are so few outlets for the kind of work I make. There just aren't sufficiently strong, commercial contemporary galleries here that would show it." Both Dan and Shelly's experience demonstrates how difficult it can be to access audiences both inside and outside of Cornwall when this county is your home – a double whammy for artists making original and progressive work. "You have to work hard to get your work out there," says Shelly, "and you still need to show in larger urban settings in order to reach that bigger audience – in London in particular. You've got to be willing to put your work up for exhibitions anywhere nationally, and that can be expensive. But there are many national open exhibitions, and that's a good way of getting national exposure. I have been very lucky and have had work included in The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, the Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Exhibition, the Columbia Threadneedle Prize and the Discerning Eye Exhibitions, and exposure in these shows can lead to other opportunities." "But," notes Dan, "entering open competitions means delivering your work to a show hundreds of miles away, at great expense and with no guarantee it will get hung. The cost of merely entering these competitions is increasing, and when the average wage in Cornwall is less than half that of the rest of the country those costs can be prohibitive."

So why do so many artists come to Cornwall from far and wide, to settle and pursue their career here when the challenge of reaching collectors is so tough? "Because Cornwall has always had a voice of its own, a sort of unique visual language," says artist Maxwell Steele, who recently moved to Cornwall and completed Newlyn School of Art's One Year



ABOVE
'Organised Abandonment' – Dan Pyne

ABOVE
'Don't Take It Personally It's Just Business' – Dan Pyne,
Unstable Monuments exhibition, Bristol

Mentoring Course for professional artists. "The remoteness is a plus in a way, you're free, to think and create and not be influenced." Shelly agrees, saying: "here, I am less influenced by what the national art scene expects me to create. That pressure can be counterproductive. Down here there is less 'noise' in terms of 'should' and shouldn't', so I can focus more completely on what I want to do."

"I think the challenges to artists have always been the same," adds Maxwell, "of survival and a desire to be heard, a chance to tell your story." Maxwell's mention of 'story telling' is pertinent: sharing stories around inspirational locations, exhibitions, and the creation of artworks is a key strategy in my own area of work, and one that attracts gallery and collector attention through print and online publicity that reaches far beyond Cornwall's borders. It's an approach that more and more artists are tapping into. "With social media," says Maxwell, "you can create your own persona, and you can be anywhere in the world, however remote, and still be heard."

"The pandemic forced me to look at doing more online," says Penwith based abstract artist Trudy Montgomery, "like exhibiting with online galleries with a national and international reach, or holding online open studio events. The internet makes everything visible in seconds, so the barriers to connecting Cornish artists to the rest of the country are much less now." Digital communications also make it easier than ever before to maintain relationships with collectors who have purchased works whilst visiting Cornwall. "One family drove all the way back to Germany with a one of my works wedged in the back seat!" Trudy tells me, "and now they've turned into loyal collectors who buy via my website." But challenges remain: "I had a corporate collector derail his visit because he hadn't realised how far west I was," she adds. Despite such problems, she tells me, "as a place to work, Cornwall is amazing. I can get any supplies I need delivered to my door, I use a delivery service to get my art to London, and my galleries visit at least once a year. The best galleries are happy to make the journey to find the best art to share it with their collectors."

While efforts continue to connect our most progressive contemporary artists with the wider art scene, here in Cornwall much still relies on the self-promotion and collaboration of artists themselves. "The art scene here is huge and vibrant, and is infused with a strong DIY ethos," says Dan. "If you want to show work here, you find a space and make it happen, and there are some great spaces to create your own shows, such as Jupiter Gallery, Daisy Lang Gallery, PZ gallery and the amazing Tremenheere Gallery." And hope for more opportunities within Cornwall remains: "Things are changing," says Shelly, "but slowly. You really can find galleries here showing new, relevant and challenging work – but they are still few and far between. My hope is that new galleries and curators will emerge here to showcase new kinds of work."

danpyne.co.uk
shellytregoning.net
maxwellsteele.co
trudymontgomery.com