

Places & Faces

*Sian Hoyle meets the Jonathan Vickers
Fine Art Award Winner Eleanor Watson*

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ARTIST Eleanor Watson has spent the past nine months immersing herself in the history of Derbyshire, in particular by discovering some of the extraordinary women who helped shape its history. Eleanor, the current holder of the Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award, is approaching the end of her nine month residency in the county as the seventh winner of this prestigious award. Before her arrival in Derbyshire, Eleanor, who comes from Surrey, had just completed the Drawing Year at the Royal Drawing School, having graduated from Wimbledon College of Art in 2012 with a First Class Honours BA in Painting.

I recently caught up with Eleanor at her studio in the University of Derby's Banks Mill, provided as part of the Award, to see her paintings and talk about her time in the county.

Back in September, she had relatively little knowledge of Derbyshire and spent her first few weeks getting to know it and doing her research. She explains: 'At the outset I approached the Award theme "A Sense of Place – the Changing Faces of Derbyshire" as a very open-ended project. Whilst researching, I came across so many extraordinary women in the history of Derbyshire, from Queen Cartimandua through to Bess of Hardwick, Florence Nightingale and Alice Wheeldon, as well as a long list of contemporary women I admire.

'The challenge of this residency has been to create a body

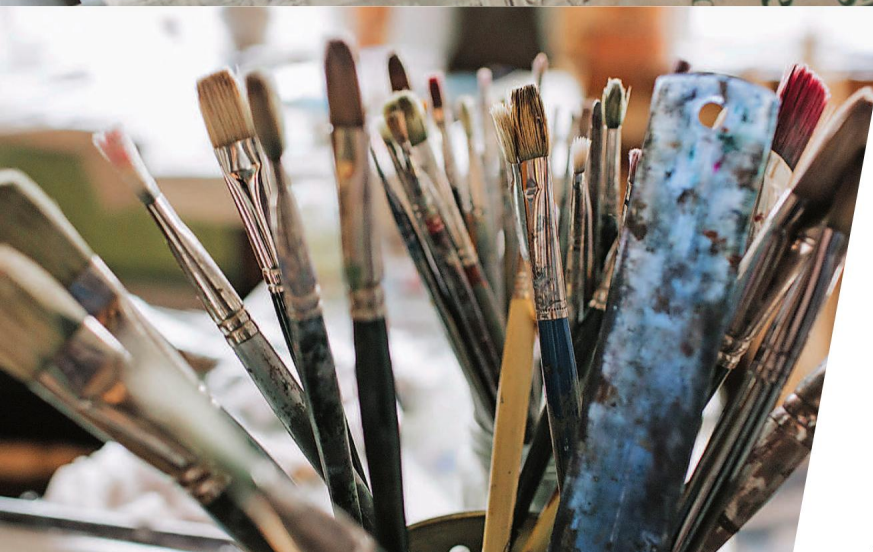
"Whilst researching the Award theme I came across so many extraordinary women in the history of Derbyshire"

of paintings which relate to these Derbyshire women, whilst exploring pre-existing themes within my work. I make oil paintings from found photographs of domestic interiors, some are populated with characters and others are empty. Absence, and the ambiguity this creates, is an important theme – as is the artifice and staging of figurative picture-making. Therefore, many of these paintings are missing their central character; instead the setting or objects tell something of their story. Their absence also defies the tradition of the male gaze of the female sitter.

'I was keen to use a broad range of source material; from direct observation, found photographs, collage and film stills. The context of each image influences the way the viewer understands the scene in the painting; the traditional portrait or landscape has a very different feeling to a mediated image, such as a film still, and I have really enjoyed playing around with these differences across the group of paintings.'

Eleanor has been able to meet many of the women she so admires: 'The generous response and contribution of the women who have been involved has been humbling. Amongst them: Jasvinder Sanghera, the founder of Karma Nirvana, lobbyist and author of *Shame*; Sandeep Parmar, whose poem *Archive for a Daughter* has inspired a series of paintings; Helen Mort, the Chesterfield-based poet who has written about another Derbyshire great, the





mountaineer Alison Hargreaves; Joanna Cannon, best-selling author of *The Trouble with Goats and Sheep*; film maker and boxer, Juliette Anne Winter, who was the first British Board of Boxing Control Ladies' Flyweight Champion, and Hollie Webb the Olympic hockey player. I can't wait to see how this collection comes together in September.'

Eleanor's work marks another step towards the creation of a permanent art collection for Derbyshire. The Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award was established in 1998 with the help of a legacy from the estate of the late Jonathan Vickers, a lifelong lover of fine arts, and is managed by Foundation Derbyshire. The Award itself was first made in 2001, with the aim of developing a collection of work by rising artists, which will be recognised nationally and will enrich the cultural life of Derbyshire. Eleanor was selected for the Award back in June 2015 from a high quality field, competing against applicants from across the country.

Each Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award winner is asked to donate a proportion of the work they produce during their year's residency to the permanent collection, which Foundation Derbyshire is building for the county.

Education and outreach into the wider community is a key component of the Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award and Eleanor has been working with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) Ambassadors from Rolls-Royce and staff from Derby Museums exploring 'The Science of Art'. They will produce a toolkit for workshop leaders to explore the affinities between art and science for use with primary school children and families. This project is supported by funding from Rolls-Royce plc.

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Eleanor has also spent some time working with students at the University of Derby's College of Art; this included a four day painting workshop, a presentation about her work and one-to-one tutorials.

Earlier in her residency, Eleanor provided a taster of her work in an exhibition at New Court Gallery at Repton School, which gave her the opportunity to gauge the first responses to some of the paintings produced during her residency. She will also be exhibiting at Melbourne Arts Festival's Art and Architecture Trail on 16th and 17th September.

Eleanor's final exhibition of the work she has produced, which currently has a working title of *We Make the Routes We Follow*, will be held at Derby Museum and Art Gallery from 15th September to 19th November. All the paintings (apart from those selected for the Collection), plus limited edition prints of a selection from the paintings, will be on sale at the Museum. Eleanor has previously exhibited in London, Miami and New York. ♦

For more information please visit: www.vickersartaward.co.uk; www.eleanorwatson.org; www.derbymuseums.org; www.foundationderbyshire.org