

Sea fever

Maritime art was once dismissed as old-fashioned, but Laura Gascoigne finds contemporary artists being drawn back to the sea



The art of survival: to paint *Rounding Ardnamurchan Point in a Blow*, Ross Ryan tied himself to the rail of his boat *Sgarbh* on a solo voyage

AS professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, J. M. W. Turner gave a lecture in which he praised ‘our variable climate where the seasons are recognisable in one day... Endless variety is on our side and opens a new field of novelty’. The Swiss had their Alps and the Italians their Bay of Naples; we British had our weather. We also had the advantage of living on an island with flat horizon lines in every direction, opening up uninterrupted views of the sky and its reflections in the water. Before Turner, the sea had not been considered a worthy subject for art, other than as a setting for stories from the Bible or Classical mythology. Romanticism and the railways changed all that.

As ease of travel facilitated the fashion for sea bathing, the picture-buying classes acquired a taste for the coast and a hankering for paintings to remember it by. Seaside boarding houses opened in popular resorts where visiting artists could base themselves, as Turner did in Margate and Constable—with great reluctance and only for his consumptive wife’s health—in fashionable Brighton. By the end of the 19th century, artists’ colonies were springing up in fishing villages, such as St Ives in Cornwall and Staithes in North Yorkshire, to cater for the market; in the following century, with the rise of Modernism and Pop Art, the market moved on. However, artists native to this sea-girt isle could not resist the lure of the sea for long.

Norman Ackroyd RA was one of the first to succumb, when, in 1974, he exchanged the urban *zeitgeist* of New York for the sea squalls of the Orkneys. Since then, he has spent his summers documenting stretches of our cloud-wreathed coastline in atmospheric aquatints based on watercolour sketches made afloat. For *Morning Sunlight, Bempton* (2014), part of his ‘Saltburn to Flamborough’ print series, he set out at dawn in a chartered boat from Whitby. Amid the drama of the first sun striking the chalk-white mass of the cliff face, his eye was drawn to the gannets clustered in its crevices and the scattered birds silhouetted against the brightening sky above. ‘I collect gannetries,’ he tells me;

he’s hoping to add another to his collection on his trip to Co Mayo this month. As much as in the weather and the bird-life, the romance of these coasts, with their island archipelagos, lies in their remote history. ‘It’s to do with the extremities,’ Mr Ackroyd explains. ‘If you think about the extremities of Britain, from the Outer Hebrides and John O’ Groats to Land’s End and the Scillies, it’s not only the edge of Europe, it’s the edge of Asia. People have lived on these islands for 3,000 or 4,000 years.’ A good sea picture contains more than meets the eye: there’s almost always something going on beneath the surface. In Peter Archer’s seascapes, as in Turner’s, the underlying tension comes from human interventions in the grand scheme of Nature: ‘There’s always a bit of an incident, a man-made incident, involved.’

‘The Swiss had their Alps and the Italians their Bay of Naples; we had our weather’

In *A Wide Sea with Wreck* (2014), the rusting hulk of a grounded tanker hints obliquely at the sort of maritime disaster that Turner would have recorded in full swing. Mr Archer’s view of the sublime is more subdued. His dark, moody skies, with their grey-blue cloud over grey-green seas, are climatic features any inhabitant of these isles will recognise, but his pictures are painted purely from imagination. Although the Stockport-born painter has never lived by the sea, 20 years ago, the urge to paint it came out of nowhere: ‘It was like a bubble coming up from below.’

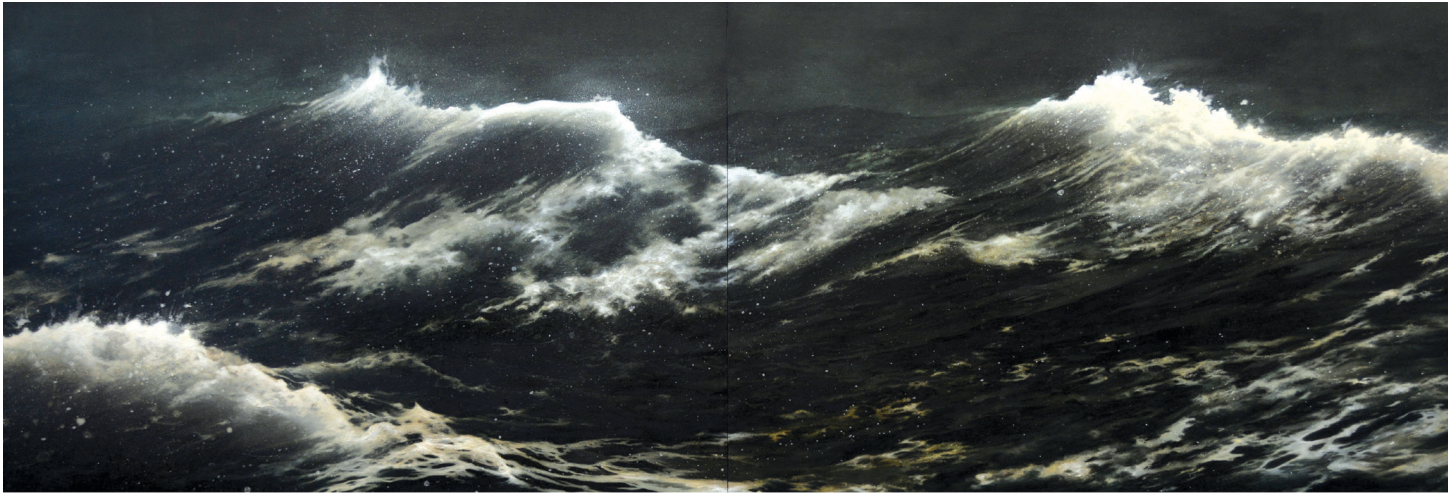
Now, just as suddenly, after two decades of immersion in the subject, the bubble has



Underlying tension: *A Wide Sea with Wreck* by Peter Archer is suffused with drama

burst. The title of his latest exhibition, which has just closed at Kelly Ross Fine Art in Dorset, was ‘Farewell to the Seas’. ‘My fascination with the sea has run his course,’ he feels, but his pictures will continue to exert their fascination. Penzance-born sea painter Sax Impey has no plans to abandon the subject. Based in St Ives’s historic Porthmeor Studios, two doors down from the former studio of the great maritime painter Julius Olsson, he turned his back on the sea view for years, to paint compositions inspired by mathematics and satellite imagery. It was only after he took up sailing in his mid-thirties that the waters rushed in. Now a qualified RYA Yachtmaster, he makes regular trips across the Atlantic delivering yachts—when I caught up with him for this article, he was in Bermuda on his way to New York. The experience has given him a singular perspective on his subject. In mid Atlantic, he explains: ‘You’re carrying a rather small world with you.

The horizon is only three miles away; a six mile-diameter is all there is.’ With their white-capped peaks and valley-like troughs, the small aquatic worlds he depicts are like mountain ranges, but mountain ranges in constant flux. Painters of seascapes usually give the viewer an imaginary foothold on *terra firma*, but with an Impey painting, you’re treading water. When he started depicting the sea, he took his cue from Turner: ‘I wasn’t interested in painting the land from the sea. I was interested in painting the experience of being at sea. That’s what my paintings are about. They’re deep waters; they carry a sense of jeopardy.’ Scottish painter Ross Ryan, born of sea-faring stock in the Argyll fishing village of Crinan, has taken the identification with Turner even further. He painted *Rounding Ardnamurchan Point in a Blow* when single-handling his 1940s fishing boat, *Sgarbh*, in heavy seas—one up on Turner, who, the story goes, merely observed a storm on shipboard safely lashed to the mast. ➤



In Sax Impey’s paintings, such as *Night, Celtic Sea*, the viewer’s perspective has no firm foothold, but is adrift amid mountainous waves

The blow-by-blow account in Mr Ryan's logbook of the painting's genesis reads like a thriller: harnessed to the boat's guard rail, with his board and palette jammed between tyres, he 'lumped on the paint' with two hands and drew into it with charcoal to capture the dark form of the Ardnamurchan lighthouse on the horizon puncturing the ragged blanket of cloud.

It was the climax of the 60-day journey up the west coast of Scotland that was recorded in his exhibition 'The Logbook—A Solo Winter Voyage' at The Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh last year.

‘A good sea picture contains more than meets the eye: there's something going on beneath the surface’

Mr Ryan needs a physical challenge to get the artistic adrenaline pumping. 'I'm always trying to do the more extreme where surviving is a priority,' he tells me, adding reassuringly: 'I'm not out there to kill myself.'

His next exhibition with The Scottish Gallery will be based on his 'Bottle Project', a ritual inaugurated on his first trip across the Atlantic in 1998, when he threw a daily message in a bottle into the sea. It's a tradition he's kept up ever since: his May 2020 exhibition will follow the fortunes of the bottles dropped during his 2018 journey.

Louise Balaam takes a more relaxed approach to her subject, preferring to sit on the shore soaking up the atmosphere than



Cornish Coast by Louise Balaam is full of shifting light, gusting winds and blown gulls

to dice with death on the high seas. Like Mr Ackroyd, she's drawn to the coast by the sense of an edge, the openness of the horizon providing a stage for the ever-changing drama of the weather: 'On the coast, it's so elemental. You've got the sky, the sea and a bit of landscape and, because the sea reflects the sky, that constant mutability.'

Her gestural paintings, with their sweeping brushstrokes that seem to ride air currents across the canvas, recall Peter Lanyon—although she's never been up in a glider, she likes the exhilaration of perching on a clifftop looking down.

She doesn't paint *en plein air*—she finds it makes her too literal—but makes rapid sketches registering 'different layers of responses' to the light, the wind, the sea below and the birdsong above, hoping to 'internalise the elements' for recollection in the studio. Her work is about re-creating the atmosphere, rather than reliving the experience; a follower of Constable rather than Turner, she aspires to 'that quality of emotion, not striving for effects. No bravado'.

That quality of emotion is also central to the small, poetic canvases of Hannah Mooney, a young graduate of Glasgow School of Art who won the Fleming-Wyfold Bursary last year. Painted in the pearly light of dawn—she's an early riser—or nearing sundown when colours are at their richest, her deceptively simple seascapes have a melancholy sensibility that seems almost Symbolist in mood.

Growing up on the coast of Co Donegal, she believes there is 'no emotional pull greater than that of the sea'. Its lure for her,

as for Miss Balaam, lies in its mutability: 'The relationship between light and water is a compelling one. In a few seconds, light can transform the sea from ultramarine blue to pale luminous silver.' The effect of wind on water is another source of fascination: 'It's mesmerising to watch how the wind can transform a calm, glass-like surface into an agitated whirl of whitecaps.'

The sea, she points out, can't be bottled like Mr Ryan's messages: 'As soon as you take moving water and put it in a jar, it becomes lifeless and still. No one can take the sea home with them.' The memory can, however, be miraculously preserved on canvas.

‘In a few seconds, light can transform the sea from ultramarine blue to pale silver’

Gerard Stamp is best known for his exquisite architectural watercolours, seen most recently in his June exhibition in aid of SAVE Britain's Heritage at The Gallery, Clerkenwell, London EC1. A devotee of John Sell Cotman, Mr Stamp grew up in Norfolk, where he attended Norwich School, Cotman's alma mater, and spent days as a sixth-former poring over his hero's watercolours in Norwich Castle Museum.

Like Cotman, he's occasionally tempted away from architectural subjects to the fringes of the sea near his Norfolk home. When he applies his consummate command



Norfolk's endless horizons are captured by Gerard Stamp's command of perspective, as in his *Holkham Sands in Sand Fret*



Hannah Mooney depicts the ever-changing moods of the sea in *Towards the Ferry House*

of perspectival recession to the flat expanse of *Holkham Sands in Sand Fret* (2013), with the grainy blue of the foreground tidal puddles merging into the azure haze of the sky, the effect is breathtaking.

It makes a change from buildings, he explains: 'It's otherworldly, half-sea, half-land, always shifting in appearance, in mood. I love the fact that there's nothing there, but there's everything there.' It's a contradiction that, with the best sea paintings, allows the viewer infinite space to dream. 🐾

Where to see the sea

• **Norman Ackroyd will be showing at Eames Fine Art, London SE1, September 5–29; The Corn Hall in Diss, Norfolk, September 8–November 16; and Zillah Bell Gallery, Thirsk, North Yorkshire, November 30–January 4, 2020 (www.normanackroyd.com)**

• Peter Archer is represented by Art Space Gallery, London N1, and Kelly Ross Fine Art, Dorset (www.peterarcher.net)

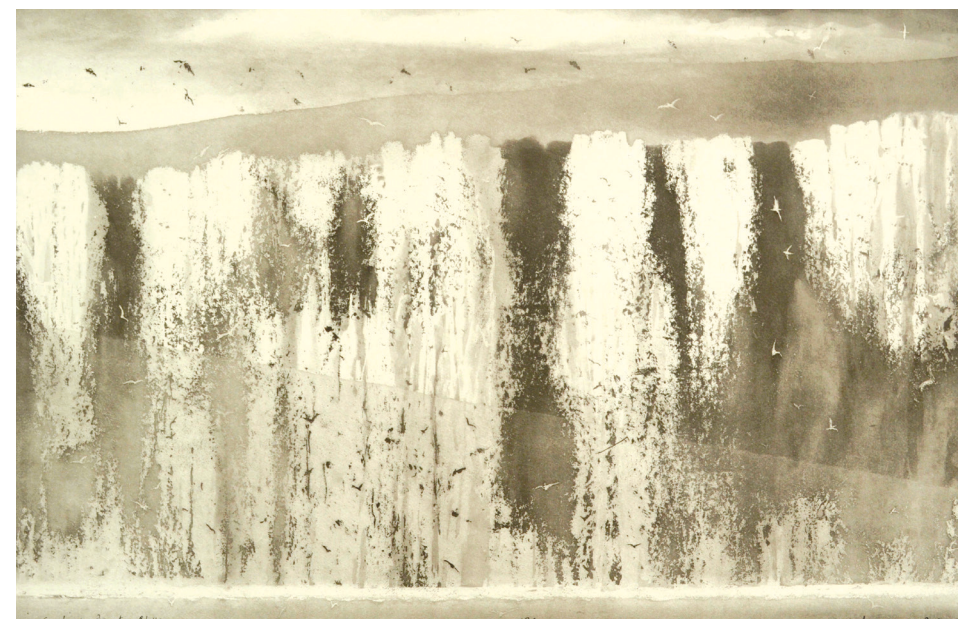
• **Sax Impey has a solo show with Anima Mundi, St Ives, Cornwall, from September 13 to October 25 (www.saximpey.com)**

• Ross Ryan's next solo exhibition is at The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, April 29–May 30, 2020 (www.ross-ryan.com)

• **Louise Balaam will be showing in a group exhibition at the Jerram Gallery, Dorset, from September 14 to October 2. She is represented by Cadogan Contemporary, London SW7 (www.louisebalaam.co.uk)**

• Hannah Mooney has a solo show at The Scottish Gallery from October 2 to 26 (www.hannahmooney.co.uk)

• **Gerard Stamp is represented by Burnham Grapevine, Burnham Market, Norfolk. His next solo show is with John Davies Gallery, Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire, in summer 2020 (www.gerardstamp.com)**



Gatherer of gannetries: birds throng Norman Ackroyd's *Morning Sunlight, Bempton Cliffs*