

Dear Reader, – finding inspiration in DERBYSHIRE

Sian Hoyle talks to Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award winner Eleanor May Watson as she prepares for her final exhibition

EVERY two years, Derbyshire welcomes a rising artist to take up a residency as the latest holder of the Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award. Established in 1998, and first awarded in 2001 with the help of a legacy from the estate of the late Jonathan Vickers, a lifelong lover of fine arts, the Award aims to create a collection of paintings which will be recognised nationally and will enrich the cultural life of Derbyshire. Each artist has an overarching brief of 'A Sense of Place', which for this Award was themed 'The Changing Faces of Derbyshire'. Eleanor May Watson was selected for the Award, which is managed by Foundation Derbyshire, back in June 2016 from a high quality field, competing against applicants from across the country. We caught up with Eleanor as she completes her residency and prepares for her final exhibition: *Dear Reader*, at Derby Museum & Art Gallery in September.



Day and Night, monotype,
80x50cm

What were your first impressions of Derbyshire?

I had spent some time here as a child; lots of National Trust family days out. It was also the romantic setting for Jane Austen's Pemberley and gothic backdrop to *Jane Eyre*. But on arriving for this residency, I was struck by how huge and diverse it is as a county. I was struggling to find a way into making paintings that represented its 'changing faces', but equally excited to get to know some of its history and landscape better.

What have you enjoyed most about your year of living in Derbyshire?

Where to begin: Derbyshire itself is so beautiful; the Peaks, the heritage... the pubs! More seriously, the Award enabled me to spend some invaluable time in the studio, meet some truly extraordinary people and



Waste, oil on canvas, 51x71cm



Eleanor May Watson at Banks Mill studios

enable me to live in an exciting new place. The project itself gave me a great excuse to get in touch with some amazing women, lots of whom, very generously, made time to meet me and be involved. I really cannot express how honoured and humbled I feel.

I have also made some wonderful friends, who have looked out for me during my time here: the amazing Jonathan Vickers Team as well my teammates and pals at Derby Hockey Club and the artists at Banks Mill Studios. All of them have welcomed me and made my time here in Derbyshire really special.

What was your biggest challenge in terms of the Vickers Award?

The biggest challenge was finding a project which allowed me to discover Derbyshire and explore its 'changing faces', but also continue with on-going themes within my practice. I usually make paintings of very staged interiors and gardens.

Making a body of work on this scale was also a new challenge. How to create one which felt like a comprehensive and cohesive investigation, but also offered variety and space for experimentation. Once I had decided on making work which related to the heroines of Derbyshire, I then embarked on a huge research project which felt ever-expanding. I could work on it for years. All that potential presented its own challenges.

How did you decide on your final choice of theme to fit the brief 'The Changing Faces of Derbyshire'?

Very broadly I was researching the history of Derbyshire. Without really thinking, I began to make a list of the many fascinating female figures in its history. During the launch event at Melbourne Hall and the open studios at Banks Mill the news of this list was so well received that I felt compelled to pursue it somehow. It offered an extremely broad base from which to make works, and although daunting, it allowed me to explore new methods of making paintings.

I was not interested in making portraits. Instead, I wanted to use these women as the protagonists of the narratives. Often they are absent. The viewer explores the space with their understanding of the women in mind, creating new stories. In other paintings, the women appear, but these are always mediated images. Unlike more traditional portraits, these have been framed by a camera lens. I was keen to explore using a variety of source material and how this affects the reading of the painting.

How important is an Award like the Vickers for an artist who wants to make art their profession?

It provides invaluable time in the studio. Making is the most important part of being ▶



Vivienne Red, oil on canvas, 150x130cm

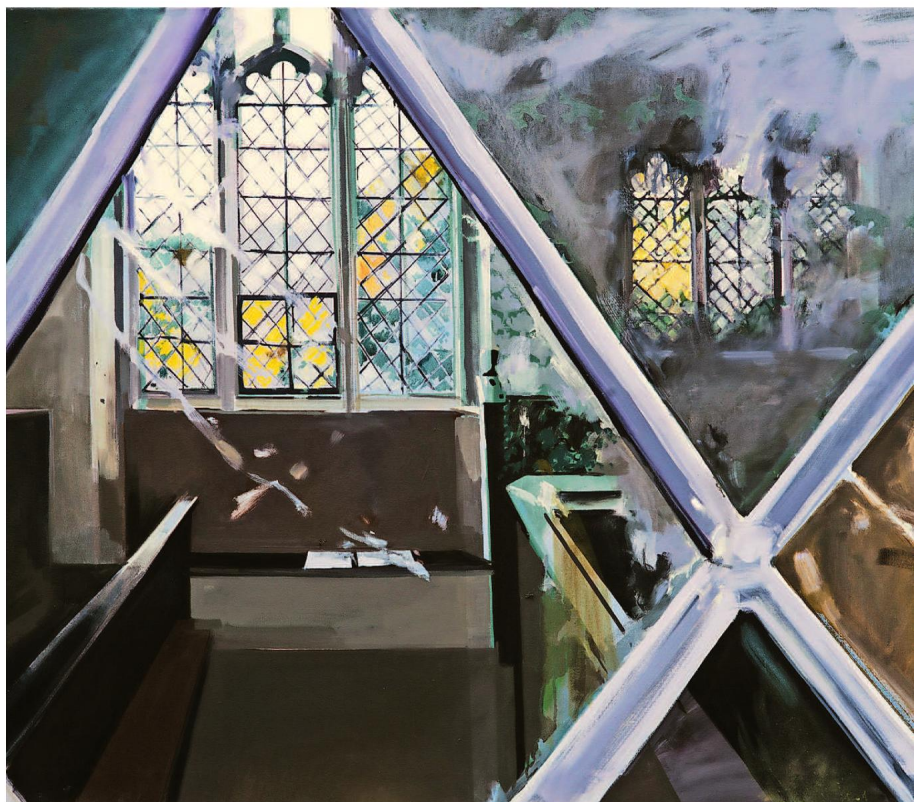
a painter for me. It also flung me far from my comfort zone, responding to a brief has been really difficult, but I have learnt plenty by doing it. Broadening my experience of teaching has also been hugely valuable. Firstly, running workshops and tutorials with fine art students at the University of Derby, which was a great insight into teaching at BA level. Secondly, developing a series of workshops on the science of art for students with STEM ambassadors from Rolls-Royce and staff from Derby Museums. This was a new experience in collaborative working.

What have you learnt about your own artistic practice this year?

It has been really interesting working in an entirely new way. Usually, I make paintings by responding to found images; deconstructing them and recreating the space with a new implied narrative. For *Dear Reader*, the search was different, much more specific, with the life stories of these women in mind. I have a very different relationship to these works. It is as though they talked or even, sometimes, wrestled back.

My work usually sets scenes which tell stories full of open-ended ambiguity. These paintings work differently, as the viewers' reading will be informed by their understanding of the protagonist. I was keen to hold on to the inherent mystery of an empty space and not give too much away.

Some elements are biographical and others are invented. I enjoyed being an unreliable narrator, these are always so alluring to me in novels.



Jane, oil on canvas, 92x127cm



Bess, oil on canvas, 80x100cm



Yellow Path (Deborah), oil on canvas, 180x180cm

Can you explain your *Dear Reader* exhibition?

I am inviting the viewer to read these scenes as settings for stories. It is unclear who is speaking, whether it is the protagonist or the narrator. I enjoy this ambiguity. It also refers to the famous line in *Jane Eyre*: 'Reader, I married him.'

What advice would you give the next Vickers Award winner?

Choose a project that gives you an excuse to meet some amazing people you would otherwise never meet. Also, sometimes you are fighting a losing battle – so, let the painting go!

What would you like to be doing in 10 years' time?

Happy and engaged in making paintings of course!

What's next for you in the art world?

I'm going to get back into the studio and try to digest, develop and refine what I have discovered this year. It will be interesting to go back to working without a brief, and see what I come up with. ♦

Eleanor Watson's exhibition, Dear Reader, is on at Derby Museum & Art Gallery from 16th Sept to 19th Nov. All the paintings (apart from those selected for the Vickers collection) will be on sale and there will be limited edition prints of three paintings. For more information please visit: www.vickersartaward.co.uk