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Artist Sarah Graham at work in her London studio. On the floor is her Orchid Frieze in charcoal.

Bold & beautiful

Artist Sarah Graham's plant portraits have a startling intensity that challenges the way we look at plants, writes Sorrel Everton. Photographs Angelo Plantamura

In her studio tucked below the Westway, one of London's busiest access roads, artist Sarah Graham is absorbed in a world of her own as she sweeps her arm across a large canvas to create striking forms in charcoal. Loud music is playing and Sarah easily finds that she has spent a whole day on a painting without really noticing. "I can hardly bear to stop once I've begun," says Sarah. "Not to eat or answer the phone. The end of the day can bring crippling back-ache and dry eyes, but it is surpassed by a splinter of euphoria."

Sarah's pictures exude an energy that draws you up short as you look at the familiar shapes of her plant forms. First there is the size of her artworks – often large scale – and secondly there is her intensity of observation.

"I'm drawn to strong, natural forms, in particular the curve and the arch, and to the energy that's involved in creating those shapes," says Sarah. Although she occasionally draws landscapes, it is in plants that she most often finds these architectural elements, as well as what she describes as the 'lyrical and mysterious' in nature.

Her pictures show the curl of a leaf, the arch of a petal, or the intricate structure of a seedhead. "I probably painted my first flower when I was

about 12," recalls Sarah. She goes on to describe her mother as a voracious gardener – something of a visionary, who took the time to show a young Sarah the inside of a magnolia flower and all its parts. "I was astonished at just how gutsy a flower it was," she says. "I still love them now."

Wilderness years

Sarah studied fine art at Edinburgh University but wasn't drawn to painting straightaway. Instead, after answering an advertisement pinned to the notice board at the Royal Geographical Society, she set off in the company of a complete stranger to ride on horseback across the plains of Central Asia, following the Old Silk Road. The pair made a film about their experiences, which they later sold to the Discovery Channel.

She moved into the world of antiques, spending time in London, the United States and Russia, and learnt to broker high-end deals on priceless items. But her desire to express her own creativity returned and it was while drawing in the Pyrenees that she realised she could no longer ignore it. She gave up her job in 2005, found a studio space and began life as an artist.

To begin with she painted landscapes, finding an elemental energy ▷



Ogee 10, mixed media.



Edinburgh-born Sarah is drawn to large-scale images.



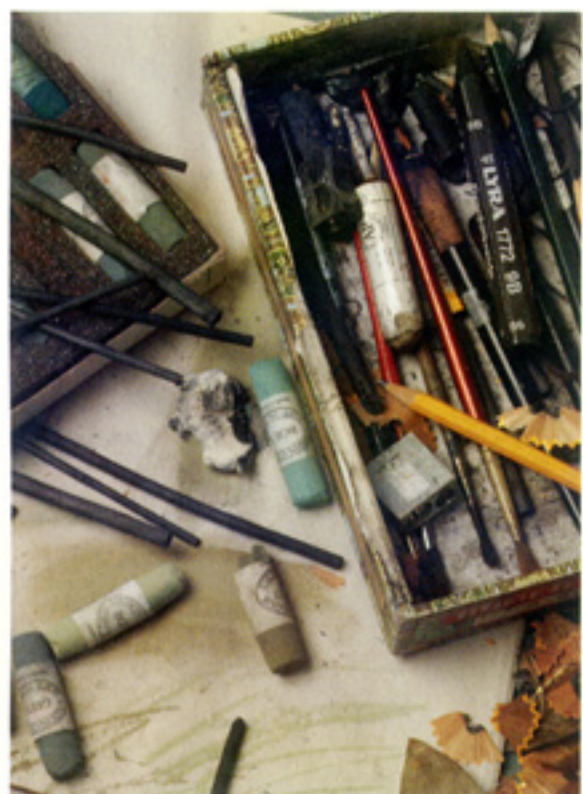
Amaryllis I in pencil and wash.



A collection of Sarah's objets trouvés.



Amaryllis III in charcoal.



Sarah prefers to use a simple selection of media.

“There’s a purity – a nakedness – about working with basically burnt wood sticks or a brush in black ink on white paper”

in big expansive spaces (she lists the firing ranges on Salisbury Plain as an influence) but, in the search for that ‘spirit’ of nature, she felt using oils too decorative and muddled.

Instead, Sarah began to pare down her style, using just charcoal with graphite, then brush and ink. “There’s a purity – a nakedness – about working with basically burnt wood sticks or a brush in black ink on white paper,” Sarah says. “You’ve only got one chance, one way, to capture the essence of what you’re looking at.”

Favourite subjects

Which brings us back to her flower pictures and their sense of intense examination. Favourite subjects are found almost anywhere – in a high-street florist, the hot houses of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew or from old black and white botanical prints. Her choice is for big, bold flowers – sunflowers, amaryllis, iris, gunneras, cannas, orchids and eremurus. Depicted large and in close-up, the plants take on a new life as “abstract motifs”, according to Sarah. “They aren’t meant to be

menacing, nor pretty, just suggestive of their own sheer energy,” she says.

Her work is now gaining a world-wide audience, with regular exhibitions in London, Ireland and recently New York. Then there’s the Chelsea Flower Show, where she returned this year for her second visit. “There’s a real exhilaration at Chelsea,” Sarah enthuses. “As an exhibitor it’s a thrill to see people stop and examine my own interpretations of the plant world. As a visitor I love going into the Great Pavilion and being surrounded by so many extraordinary plants.”

Although Sarah says she is not a gardener, she obviously feels an affinity and passion for the subject matter she selects and the pictures she creates. She explains the emotional response as like that of a parent to a child – awe, pride and concern. It is this that makes her pictures so dynamic and asks us to consider anew the essence of nature. □

Further information

For more information on Sarah Graham’s work go to www.grahamgallery.co.uk

Reader offer

Sarah Graham is offering GARDENS ILLUSTRATED readers a 10% discount on her ‘Ogee’ series of pictures. You can see a selection of these on page 42, round the edges of the studio floor. Produced as prints by John Jones, they are available sized either A4 or A3, framed or unframed and prices range from £150 to £350. Contact Sarah for details: sarah@grahamgallery.co.uk 07887 726048.



Artichoke I in pencil.



Ogee 4, mixed media.



Sunflower in charcoal.



Ogee 13, mixed media.