



The Bridgwater to Taunton Canal by Joanna Comings

*FROM POP MUSIC TO PAINTING*

TIM SAUNDERS meets the Somerset painter who finds inspiration in today's chart topping stars



Downstream; 'I have an absolute compulsion to paint'

Pop music helps landscape painter Joanna Comings to produce her best work but it is also about timing, explains the Wellington-based artist.

"I always listen to music when I work. The wrong music at the wrong time can totally alter the atmosphere and interfere with creativity, though," says Joanna, who can be found working in her studio from lunchtime until evening every day of the week, even weekends. "I like Adele, Sam Smith, recent hits like Giant and the one by Lewis Capaldi; they are voices that get under your skin.

Joanna, whose work sells from £300 for a small original to a few thousand for a large painting. "I aim to find a connection, a sense of my subject, the atmosphere of a landscape. I want to express something of what it feels like

to be there at that time of day, that season of the year. I have an absolute compulsion to paint."

Somerset's rich variety of landscape continues to surprise and delight Joanna, who relocated from Cornwall with her husband Peter, who spent much of his childhood in the county.

"I've discovered a far more gentle, and peaceful landscape than I was used to living in Cornwall. Wide panoramas, hills, farmland, woodland, canals and rivers – all rich sources of inspiration. There is also the north Somerset coast at Watchet and Minehead, with views across to Wales."

She particularly loves exploring the winding lanes leading across Exmoor to villages like Dulverton and Withypool on the way to the clapper bridge at Tarr Steps. The views from the Brendon Hills across timeless rolling hills and wooded valleys also provide

endless inspiration. "Inspiration doesn't have to come from a vast vista or famous spot, it can be simply a patch of sun through the trees or the reflection of reeds in water. For me it's the natural environment, which provides the interest, rather than the urban. I look for the reassurance of the continual, unchanging patterns of the countryside. My influence is always to follow the light as I try to portray it."

When Joanna goes for a walk in the countryside she is looking at the light through the trees, the reflections in water, the sun on a hillside. "I want to paint it before the light changes."

When the weather is kind, Joanna sketches or paints en plein air. "But if the elements are interfering with my ability to sketch, I use the digital camera and head for home, where I can concentrate without distraction."

Working on five or six paintings at once, Joanna finds that after a few hours on each a change of focus is required. "Coming back to it later you see it afresh. Once a picture is finished, I lose interest and am keen to move on to the next."

Putting paint on a blank canvas excites her. "I'm always in a hurry to express the first bare bones of an idea, to see it take shape. The problems come on the next day, when you need to put flesh on the bones – not always a smooth process. There are many times when the idea fails to convince and you have to try to see why and identify what is needed to restore it, without the whole thing becoming staid and dead. You need to keep the inspiration alive, while adding detail, which may flatten it. Painting can be frustrating. The only answer is to persevere, be brave, try new approaches. You must continually push yourself. When it works you feel a great sense of achievement – very briefly."

Joanna works in acrylics. "I love their versatility – from thin washes to impasto – modern acrylics come in a great range of subtle colours and they dry quickly – I work fast and for me that is a huge advantage."

Art has always been a part



Watched Sunset: Joanna's work can sell for anything from £500 to thousands of pounds

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of Joanna's life. "I have never been able to resist drawing or painting things and I grew up in an environment where the tools were always to hand, calling me to experiment."

Her father was a graphic designer in an age before computers. "He worked laboriously by hand, was exact and exacting; a skilled watercolourist who painted many beautiful scenes with architectural accuracy. In contrast I instinctively reject that approach and like to express the feel and emotion of a place."

Joanna exhibits throughout the South West and her last solo exhibition was at the Brevhouse Theatre and Gallery in Taunton. As a member of Creative Coverage she will be exhibiting in group exhibitions at The Bishop's Palace in Wells from 9 November until 20 December.

An accomplished teacher, Joanna has taught adults at the

running out of inspiration for topics for my students to follow. I still do workshops for local Taunton art groups."

She advises budding artists to keep painting. "Don't expect every painting to be a masterpiece, just try to see where its good and bad points are and make the next painting better. Don't be put off by fashions in painting style – just paint what you want to paint in the way you particularly want to. Follow your muse."

"To those contemplating starting to paint, I would say 'go for it'. Go to classes and try it. Everyone can make marks with paint. It is great therapy."

Future plans include painting more Somerset landscapes, with special reference to seasonal changes, the continuation of a series of portraits currently being worked on, as well as experiments with abstraction.

Her works can be seen at the

