



RUSS CHESTER

By Tim Saunders



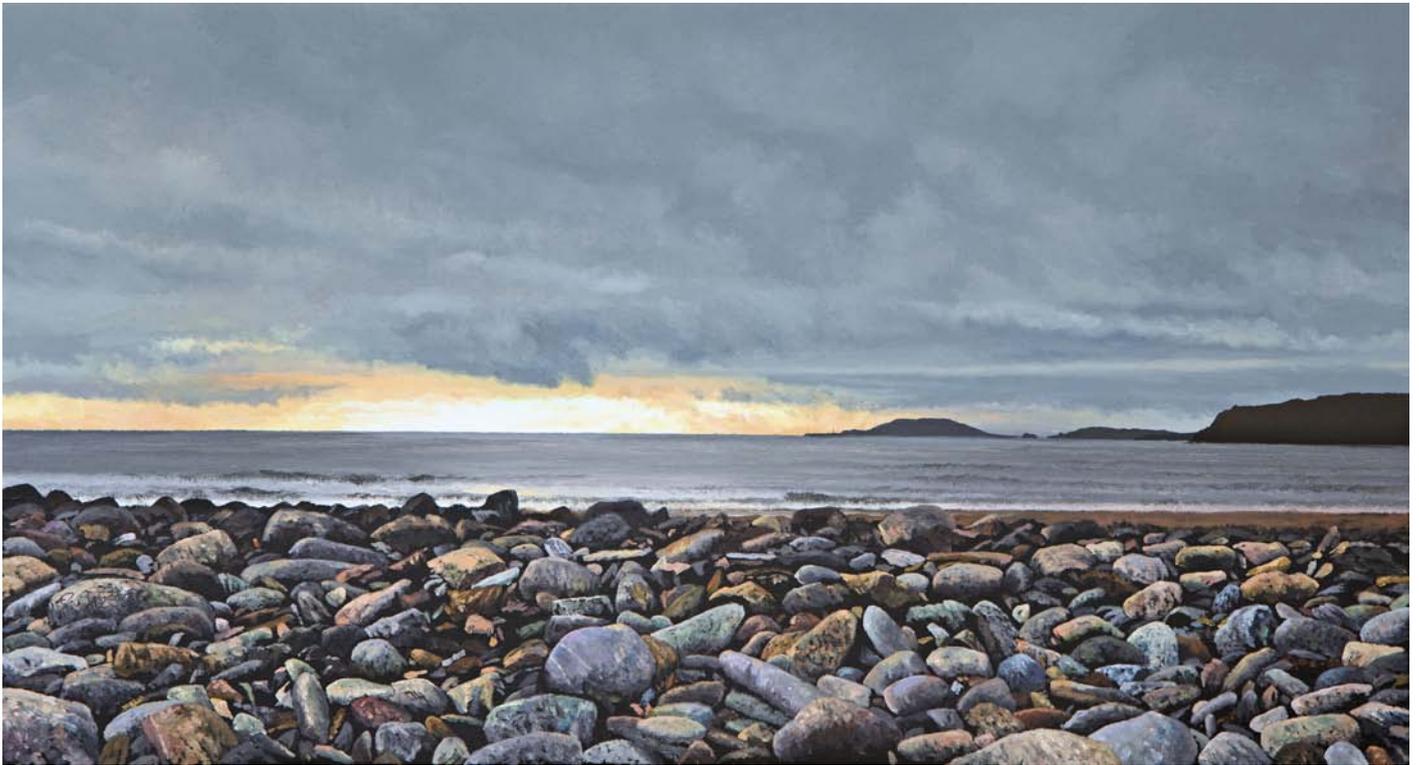
Sheep shearing doesn't rank highly among the topics that typically capture an artist's attention. But it caught Russ Chester's eye. The artist, who relocated from the north of England to Wales, has produced a series of paintings celebrating the craft.

Captions in Gaelic

“When I first moved to Wales I got involved with shearing on the farm where I was living,” recalls the successful oil painter. “I was gathering and wrapping the wool - I didn't actually do the shearing because it takes quite a lot of skill to do that. It's a yearly event. New Zealanders and Māori's used to come over. It was a good cultural exchange. Local shearers used to have a circuit where they would start off in Wales, then go to Canada and on to New Zealand, returning to Wales. They would just do a circuit round the world, shearing. You would see these guys stripped to the waist absolutely dripping in sweat and crikey they'd get through some sheep. They'd have a counter that they'd click when they'd done one. Half the time they were just wrestling



176 crib Goch mist



137 porth neigwl i ynys enlli 12 x 22 inches

sheep. The sheep weren't taking too kindly to it especially when there were rams."

Russ studied art and photography before establishing himself as a successful fine artist. "Both go hand in hand. I'm not the best photographer in the world but I need that photograph to work from," he says. "I look at a landscape, sit there with my camera and know exactly what I'm looking for even before I get it onto my computer at home. When working with commissions I need to get out, take the photo and send it to the customer to get a yay or a nay. My computer and my camera are as important to me as my brushes.

I don't have a fantastically expensive camera, only a bridge camera – you can't remove the lens – that looks like a digital SLR to all intents and purposes – very basic, just on automatic settings. It does the job."

Russ first picked up a camera in the 1970s. "It was an instant Polaroid – I got one for Christmas. When I went to art college we were introduced to proper cameras and the dark room. I was never a big fan of sending photos off to the chemist to get them developed. You might have one good one out of 36. That's the great thing about digital; you can look at them all and bin all the ones you don't like. The ones I do like I can enhance them, turn them into something that I never really had at the time. I'm not a photographer, it's a tool in my box. Very often I will walk round a landscape and know what I'm looking for. I don't get the perfect picture. I take photos of everything



227 cyn cneifio before shearing

I need to look at; shadow, light. I bring them home and then create a picture that I'm interested in painting.

"Once I get a photograph of a landscape onto my computer I can zoom in, crop it, change lighting, and basically create an image that I'm interested in painting. I can enlarge it, see the colours, see the detail. I don't paint the detail as such, focussing on technique and texture and I try to put as much of that in as possible."

A painting will take Russ an average of 16 to 50 hours. "It's not practical in any sense to sit out in the landscape for that length of time especially winter scenes so I don't do plein air anymore."

Russ's mood determines what he paints. "Sometimes I feel that I need a bit of a challenge. I look at a certain image on my computer and think I don't want to paint that and then I'll



097 cneifio shearing rams No2 13 x 19 inches

keep looking at it over a period of many months when it will finally grab my attention and in the end I have to paint it."

Russ has painted subjects ranging from derelict buildings through to mountains. "I've been looking at the landscape for



232 cneifio shearing Cwm Mawr 13 x 09 inches



232 cneifio shearing Cwm Mawr 13 x 09 inches

the past 30 years, I know the light, I know the weather, I know the rain and the cold, anything that grabs my attention I will turn my hand to."

Russ has been interested in art, since he was small. "I would lie on the sitting room floor, drawing or painting," he recalls. "It's always been in me. It never occurred to me to become an artist because it was always just a hobby, something that I did for pure enjoyment."

But all that started to change when in 2014 he had the idea of trying to put his work in galleries, "maybe selling a bit here and there, nothing serious". Four years later he was given the chance of putting 20 paintings in a gallery in Anglesey and he sold 17. I thought 'wow'. The gallery thought it successful enough that they gave me another exhibition."

Buoyed with this confidence, in 2019 Russ began to concentrate solely on his painting. "Back then I had a target of having an exhibition two years later so I was working towards

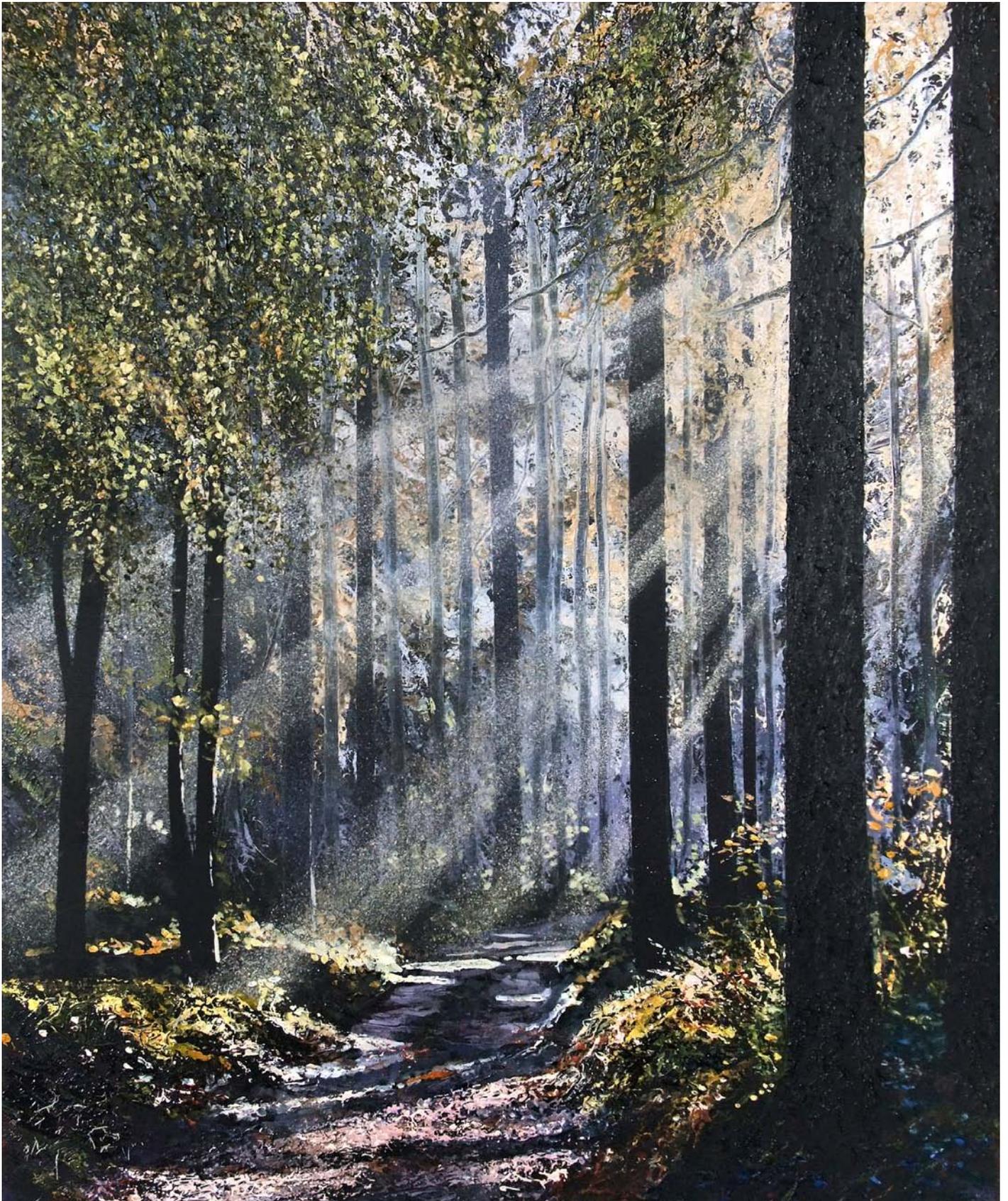
that. Then I was offered another exhibition in another gallery in 2022. Then Covid struck."

For the past three years Russ has been really struggling not to sell his work directly to customers so that he could hold it back for his galleries. "That's really difficult to do but I fulfilled my brief, got 100 paintings to the two galleries."

He paints for no longer than four hours at a time. "My patience is exhausted, I'm exhausted and I have to go and have a lie down for an hour afterwards! I know that if I continue, I'll wreck what I'm painting. The amount of thought I'm putting into my work does tire me out. Pure concentration is exhausting; I'm thinking about each bit of paint and mixing it. I don't have tubes and tubes of paint and work from four basic colours plus white and black. I'm always thinking about colours."

Russ doesn't use acrylics at all; they're too fast drying. "I like the richness of oil painting which also allows me to make mistakes and I just scrape it off. I try not to make mistakes these days."

He uses Winsor & Newton – "nothing too expensive but good quality" and he doesn't paint on canvas. "I use quite an aggressive technique called sgraffito that sees me actually scratch through the paint. I nearly ripped through a canvas one day and I thought I can't go on like this. I don't like the strange consistent texture on a canvas behind the painting, which I feel can detract from it so I paint on wood panel - marine ply. I go to the local builder's merchant. I collect images for paintings and decide beforehand what size I'm going to do them. The merchant will cut the sheets into sizes I require."



134 coetir woodland No3 10 x 08 inches

If the sun is shining Russ is painting; he has to paint in natural light for the best results. "I paint on a stool that has a big spring in the base – my father-in-law who was a dental technician, gave it to me. When I lean over, the stool leans with me."

During 2022 Russ has had two large solo exhibitions where the majority of his work has sold, which has been a pleasant surprise for him during the cost-of-living crisis which is gripping the United Kingdom and other parts of the world.

[Russ Chester Art Celf - home](#)