



Purple's collection of insightful paintings is exhibited at the dynamic new O3 gallery in the Oxford Castle

Karen Purple is a local artist with much broader aspirations. Her work is not inspired by lofty themes or complex emotions but by a physical and psychological relationship with nature, which her paintings address visually. I caught up with Karen at her exhibition *Between Here and There* at the O3 gallery and asked her about her work.

Isolated in her rural environment in Witney, Purple paints what she finds in her daily encounters with nature, collecting and accumulating snippets of experience in the form of words, natural objects and observed colours. Her paintings emerge from these pieces of memory as entirely new creations. Purple describes her work as a form of visual poetry: painting as a poetic medium, inspired by the fundamental experience of walking and observing. She treats painting as a non-political practice, at once highly personal to the artist and visually accessible to the viewer.

For Purple, personal experience is as vital as shared experience. When working on her paintings, intuition often leads the way, and the objects seem to make themselves during intense sessions in the studio. Her work tries to avoid 'boxes', she says. The title of her newest set of works, *Small Field Paintings*, on show at O3, is a pun on the idea of the high art 'colour field' painting, indicating that art should be as much about the experience of painting as the finished product hanging in the gallery. On the other hand, she is wary of her work being labelled as 'craft' or amateur 'Sunday paintings' – the gallery space is a place as much for the recognition as for the experience of art.

Between Here and There is a colourful, insightful collection of paintings with which the viewer

engages on a fundamental level. Purple stresses the importance of memory in her work and the exhibition title reflects this in two senses: the physical distance between the landscape and the observer, and the temporal distance between the experience and its recall. Purple regards the canvas on which she works as 'an arena for the act of remembering to take place' – it is the mediator between the 'seen' and the 'seer', uniting past experience with present recollection. The paintings therefore provoke and record memories, while conceding their ultimate subjectivity.

Purple is perhaps the only person for whom the coming of spring is problematic: it brings an overbear-

As such, her paintings are far from accurate representations – she works from memory, and she remembers colour. The intensity of the *Colourblock* paintings lies in their layered appearance. At first, the eye focuses on the flat coloured surface. Looking within the circles, however, more circles and lines are discernible, stretching back infinitely into the canvas: ghostly presences locked under layer upon layer of paint.

Looking at the exhibition with Purple, I felt alarmed by the choices she had made – not because I disliked them, but because her work seemed to me so honest that everything I saw resonated with her personality. I am unsure whether

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ing abundance of colour, while in winter, she says, the predominant dullness offsets the rare glimpses of colour that do emerge in nature. The *Small Field Paintings* convey precisely that contrast. The *Colourblock* paintings, also showing at O3, exemplify this necessary engagement with colour.

Each *Colourblock* painting consists of circular shapes layered up using multiple colours of paint and glaze, while each painting has an individual tonal bias based on colours Purple has observed in the landscape – *Colourblock Cold Blue*, for instance, or *Colourblock Brown Tea River*. Purple seems to see colour as an underlying structure, a definitive feature of each natural scene.

this was because I had met her in person, but I realised we're often foolish for experiencing art selfishly, expecting it to perform.

This attitude limits our appreciation of the work immensely, since we cease to marvel at the choices made by an artist if he or she remains faceless to us. Perhaps the honesty that lay behind Purple's paintings meant that her personality was particularly evident in her work. But on a more general level, exhibiting the products of your creative imagination and having to defend them against the tendency of the human mind to categorise and organise must be an exposure that artists find incredibly difficult to deal with, but which Purple seems prepared to face.