



IN THE FRAME

Contemporary still life

In the latest of her series on buying art, EMILY TOBIN looks at three contemporary painters who capture the essence of still life – colour, light and space – in an entirely fresh manner



Alice Mumford, Jill Barthorpe and Susan Ashworth all focus on inanimate objects in domestic settings. Flowers, fruit, vases and bowls feature often and the temptation to place the work of these artists under the still-life umbrella is great; however, the traditional label doesn't quite fit. Rather than creating photorealist vignettes in the style of the Dutch masters, these artists are more concerned with the abstract and ephemeral qualities of their subjects. They emphasise light, colour and space, and in doing so they elevate the lowly to loftier planes. Alice Mumford sums up this notion succinctly: 'Still lifes speak of more than just the objects: they imply greater surroundings, things that have happened, people who have passed by, things that might happen. They explain something of the world, even if it's through the everyday.'

Alice, who is based in Cornwall, trained in 'the wonderful observational tradition' at Camberwell College of Art and says she's spent the years since 'trying to make sense of this process'. Her work is characterised by exuberant colours and impulsive, loose brushwork, yet the overall effect is poised and calm. The space around her subject matter is given equal billing to the subject itself, with large textured planes of vivid colour, illuminated by the Cornish light.

'Different combinations of colour or a new pigment can help to express that perception,' explains Alice. She describes colour as 'unruly'. 'I quite often spend half a day setting up still lifes with different cloths and objects, observing how they alter according to what is next to them. This is the beginning of a painting.'

For Jill Barthorpe, 'The excitement of painting is trying to capture the likeness of things without slavish description.' Like Alice, she often uses objects of a transient nature such as flowers, fruit

and leaves. 'Their constant movement and the passage of light during the day forces me to make decisions about their essential character,' she explains. These shifts and changes are realised through geometric structures and compositions; space is reinvented with flat, angled planes, not usually associated with the fragility of petals and blossom. Jill approaches colour with a similar attitude. 'I find colour incredibly mysterious,' she says. Her tactic is to 'distil the essence of a particular pigment' by using a restricted palette for each painting, thereby retaining a sense of scale within her colours.

Susan Ashworth's interest in the work of Richard Diebenkorn, the twentieth-century abstract expressionist, is reflected in her tabletop paintings. 'Objects find their way into the paintings rather than being searched out,' she says. 'They are mostly things that have been passed on to me, found or picked in the garden.' These images are, in essence, scaled-down landscapes – 'lone buildings or trees dwarfed in expanses of wide open space, in which oblique light picks out objects'. For Susan, 'The colour should purely be the content, used to describe the light on the objects or space. If it becomes the subject, it is not working.'

Instead, light, shadow and space are the main event. There is a constant interplay between the flat surface and the illusion of depth and solidity. As with Alice's work, there is a feeling here that someone or something has just passed out of view, but the effect is rather more melancholic. To see more work by Alice Mumford, visit www.alicemumford.com; prices start at £800. Jill Barthorpe's work can be seen at www.jillbarthorpe.co.uk, where prices start at £1,200. Contact Susan Ashworth through www.susanashworth.com; prices start at £450 for a small painting



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

SUSAN ASHWORTH
'Pink Hydrangea', oil on board, 80 x 70cm

ALICE MUMFORD
'Saffron Cloth and Hawthorn', oil on canvas, 61 x 83cm

JILL BARTHORPE
'Italian Jug', oil on canvas, 81 x 71cm