

## The Weekend *Big Read*

# 'Mont Orgueil is pure drama'

Sussex-based landscape artist Tony Parsons travels the globe creating oil paintings that have made him in demand from Cornwall to Cairo. He spoke to **Tom Ogg** about his latest Jersey exhibition, being flown across the Irish sea by Prince William – and incurring the wrath of Tai-Shan Schierenberg



■ Tony Parsons: 'I was put on the news, I made friends with Sophie the weather lady – I decided I really rather liked Jersey'

from embarking upon such a globe-trotting profession.

'Look, I could happily paint Jersey 'til the cows come home but, if I visit more than a couple of times a year, my partner will think I'm taking the p's's,' says Tony, chatting from his studio in the Sussex countryside.

'There are only so many times I can disappear aboard before I'm reminded that the children might like to go somewhere nice as well. It probably doesn't help if I'm taking a Skype call while standing on a beach in the sun with no shoes on. It makes it difficult to say "this is terribly hard work" and sound convincing.'

And it is doubly difficult when the call comes while Tony is working on an

exhibition in the Caribbean, as happened earlier this year.

'I was halfway through a video call with my partner and I said: "Ooh, look, there's a puffer fish",' he recalls. 'She replied: "You're really working hard over there, aren't you?"'

Joking aside, Tony does indeed work hard, having spent decades honing his artistic craft and developing his reputation as one of the most talented landscape artists in the UK, with the sheer quality – and quantity – of his oil paintings ensuring his work is in demand right across the globe.

'I've even done work on that other Channel Island that we're not allowed to talk about,' he says. 'You really should all just make friends, you know.'

It is Jersey, not Guernsey, which Tony will be visiting next, however, with a series of school visits, a live demonstration and an exhibition of his work at the Royal Yacht Hotel all scheduled for next month.

'This will be my third exhibition of Jersey paintings since 2020,' he says. 'The exhibition will be entirely coastal scenes of Jersey, all of which I painted while visiting the Island in March.'

'I've been working a lot with Islanders, including the marvellous Lou Wagstaffe of Sea Hare Photography. She is a completely crazy sea swimmer who goes out in all weathers and takes the most amazing eye-level photos with her GoPro camera. For me, it's catnip – I can't wait to paint her stuff.'

'A lot of people I meet in Jersey fire me off in different directions,' he adds. 'They tell me what their favourite views mean to them and it proves suitably inspiring. I've not stopped discovering Jersey – I find fantastic new places to paint every time I visit.'

'Good-humoured and self-deprecating, Tony introduces himself as an "international landscape painter", then immediately adds: "Hopefully that doesn't make me sound too awful".'

'My mode of operation is to bounce around the planet finding places that really grab me and that inspire me to work,' he says. 'I'll visit somewhere and paint as much as possible, whatever the weather throws at me. I usually end up with around 30 or 40 paintings, along with lots of reference photos and sketches, and then I bring it all back to my studio in Sussex.'

The studio in question is a 700-square-foot converted dairy, which is located on a farm estate near Lewes, and which is divided into two sections: a commercial pottery in which Tony works in his spare time, and a larger space in which he paints, exhibits his artwork and holds

workshops.

'I love doing demos and workshops – it is always a good giggle,' he says.

It was September 2020 when Tony visited Jersey for the first time and found himself struck by more than just the natural beauty of the Island.

'I left armed guards and masks at Gatwick, arrived at Jersey Airport, they swabbed my nose and said "crack on",' he recalls. 'It was an amazing experience to have a week off at a time when the UK was doing Covid in such a terrible way.'

'I just sort of bounced around the Island for a week painting whatever grabbed me,' he continues. 'I always have a few pieces on the go at once. You know, this is my job, it's what I do for a living, but it really felt like I was having a week off when I first came to Jersey.'

To begin, Tony uploaded his works-in-progress onto the Jersey Ask Advertise page on Facebook, with surprising results: 'Suddenly, people were turning up on the beach while I was still painting and trying to buy the painting that I hadn't finished painting yet. It was quite a strange experience and not something that ever happens at home. I was struck by how keen everyone seemed, it was lovely.'

An 'ad-hoc show' at the Methodist Hall in St Martin followed, with Tony selling almost every one of his paintings to enthusiastic visitors.

'I was put on the news, I made friends with Sophie the weather lady – it was amazing,' he says. 'I decided I really rather liked Jersey.'

A second show took place the following year, with Tony organising a promotional 'Paint on the Beach' event to coincide with the exhibition.

'Basically, I arranged to do a painting down by the Gunsite Café and, if anyone wanted to be in it, they had to be at the café at a certain time and I then painted everybody who turned up. The finished piece was then donated to charity. It was great fun and a good bit of promotion for the show.'

And now Tony is putting the finishing touches to what will be his third and biggest Jersey exhibition to date, with the ambitious 45-year-old having repeatedly braved the elements on the Island's beaches and cliffsides last month.

'I always paint, regardless of the weather,' he says. 'I've got video footage from Rozel in which I start painting in glorious sunshine and end up in torrential rain. I use oil paints, which are waterproof – but I'm not. The wind is often more of a problem, though. In fact, I had to abandon a second painting in Rozel due to the winds. I went down into the harbour at low-tide, tied my easel to one



■ 'Deep blue' by Tony Parsons, which depicts a sea view off the coast of Cornwall

of the mooring chains off one of the boats, and then a gust came along, threw the easel over and coloured everything with whatever was on my palette. And then everything was covered in sand. I had to abandon it pretty quickly.'

As this working method suggests, Tony works at speed, often finishing his elaborate landscape portraits in little more than an hour.

'I assemble quite a lot of work but some of it does get ditched, screwed up or thrown over a cliff face,' he laughs. 'If you're painting on a beach, the tide is constantly changing and the light is moving and so, yeah, you have to be able to do it in a hurry. If I'm doing an A2 piece, which is the biggest canvas I can work on outside, then I might spend three or four hours working on it, but by then you're having to remember what the light was doing a few hours ago and what the tide looked like when it was over there.'

'And, of course, the tides in Jersey move insanely quickly. I've been caught out a couple of times. The easel legs swell up when they get wet, which is rather a problem.'

Asked if he has a favourite location in Jersey in which to paint, Tony replies: 'I've found that everywhere in Jersey offers something different. I do find myself running up to Rozel or Plemont if there is a big blowy south-westerly wind and then tucking myself in under the sea wall. Mont Orgueil is pure blow-your-socks-off drama – I love it. We don't have castles on rocks in Sussex. For sheer natural sculpted beauty, I think going down to Beauport is hard to beat.'

'Jersey is a bit special,' he continues. 'In the UK, I'll drive 400 miles from the Dover cliffs to the lighthouses in Cornwall and then up to the beaches in South Wales, whereas in Jersey all you have to do is hop 500 yards from one bay to the next. It's just got everything. For landscape painters, it's a fairly incredible place to visit.'

Getting to and from the Island, however, isn't always quite such an enjoyable experience: 'Jersey is so lovely that it is worth messing about with the bloody awful ferries. I remember on one occasion

I arrived 59 minutes before the ferry was due to leave and was told: "The gates shut an hour before". They wouldn't let me through, even though the ferry had been delayed and wasn't even in the harbour yet. But they were adamant: "We have to draw a line somewhere". It was the most astonishing jobsworthism I've ever encountered. I had to stay another night.'

Born and raised in Sussex, Tony developed his love for painting during childhood, having inherited the artistic passion and talent of his grandad.

'He was a watercolour painter and he was very good. Although he only did it as a hobby, I suppose he gave me the bug.'

Today, Tony still lives in Sussex, along with his partner, Hania, and three children, with the views from their cliff-top house proving as inspiring as the contemporary artists he enthusiastically follows, such as Peter Brown, Pete Wileman, and Jennifer McChristian.

'I'm incredibly lucky because I'm doing something I love for a living,' he says with a smile. 'Financially, it's incredibly precarious, of course. It's boom or bust. My finances would probably embarrass the IMF. I borrow tons and then try and pay it all back. Everyone knows an artist's existence is precarious, and I'm doing nothing to disprove this rule.'

Prior to dedicating himself to painting landscapes, Tony spent 15 years working as a commercial caricaturist and portrait artist, with assignments including a commission for the RAF to commemorate the retirement of the yellow Sea King helicopters, during which he sketched none other than the then-Duke of Wales.

'I spent the day being flown around the Irish Sea in a helicopter with Prince William as the pilot and all while I took photos of him and his friends to draw from back at the studio. He was really very friendly and polite. As a lifeboat skipper myself, I can confirm he was in charge of the helicopter on merit rather than favour.'

In addition, Tony spent two seasons working as the in-house artist for Portrait Artist of the Year, the popular Sky TV series.

'I was actually a contestant on

Landscape Artist of the Year in 2019, although I didn't do terribly well. They hated me. I was put in a pod facing Drake's Island in Plymouth and told to paint, but I didn't know about [judge] Tai-Shan Schierenberg's abhorrence of painting boats. It sets off his twee-ometer apparently, which is fine, but no one told me. I don't have Sky so I had never watched the show. They set me up in front of a shipping lane and so I painted what I saw, which was boats, and then I got hideously chastised for it, which was a bit unfair. It was tremendous fun, though. I'd do it all again like a shot. I love a bit of telly.'

It was 2016 when Tony first began to transition from caricatures to landscapes: 'It had got to the stage where I was just drawing bankers all the time, which is not a particularly fulfilling thing to do. I still draw at the occasional wedding every now and then, just to remind myself how to do it, but I much prefer painting landscapes.'

For now, Tony says he aims to continue visiting and exhibiting work in Jersey

on an annual basis, with a busy schedule planned for next month that might go some way to convincing his family back home that he is working hard while here.

'There will be a ticketed event on the morning before the exhibition opens, and I'm hoping to visit some more schools as well. I'm also going to be doing another 'Paint on the Beach' event. I donated the painting to charity last year and it raised £5,000 for Jersey Cheshire Home, and so I'm going to do something similar. This time it will be at Mont Orgueil, just underneath Rhona's kiosk.'

'I've no idea what the weather is going to do, I might have to tie the easel down if the rain is horizontal, but anyone who wants to be in the painting is welcome to come down and join in the fun.'

■ Tony Parsons will be hosting 'Paint on the Beach' on the beach by Rhona's at the Beach on Tuesday 9 May, from 11am. Tony's latest 'Jersey Exhibition' will be held at the Royal Yacht Hotel on Friday 12 and Saturday 13 May, 11am to 5pm. The exhibition is being sponsored by Evelyn Partners.



■ Boats in Rozel Bay. Tony typically completes his paintings in little more than an hour

THERE are obvious benefits to being an international landscape painter, not least the opportunity to travel to and work in some of the most beautiful countries on the planet.

Such is the life of Sussex-based artist Tony Parsons, whose outstanding panoramic paintings have led to him hosting exhibitions everywhere from Cairo and the Caribbean to the Channel Islands.

There are, however, pitfalls to be had



■ A work-in-progress at Noirmont Point