

# 74 An Artist writes about her work

LESLEY GASKING

I have painted now for about 15 years and definitely see myself as something of a late developer !!

By that I mean that I feel as though I have just come through the early part of an apprenticeship, as though 15 years have been spent learning how to make marks on paper or canvas followed by the discovery that now I'd like to use that experience to say something.

Jasper Johns, the American pop artist, championed the need to rid oneself of the 'tyranny of the subject matter', preferring instead to paint the same simple subject (the American flag, maps, numbers, etc.) over and over again as a kind of excuse to paint. I feel a great deal of sympathy for this view; over the years, I've taken the pain out of the "what shall I paint" angst, chosen something that captures my interest, and drawn and painted from it many times over. The drawing and paintings emerge, then, as something of a record of one's persona; changing emotions, a kind of introspective self-analysis occasionally bursting out into sheer euphoria over paint, texture and colour (I find the physical nature of a painting paramount to my enjoyment of the painting itself; for example, I never really look at surrealist images because I can never persuade myself to look beyond the rather sickly bland surfaces of the paintings!)

For many years I worked alternately from a drawing of a gravestone in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris and a tree stump found in Kearsney Abbey grounds.

My work has normally been in charcoal or in oils on canvas, both very earthy and sensuous materials to use, and the images have been very much worked through during the making process. This freedom to develop from an image spontaneously served as a marvellous foil to the more systemized process of making stained glass windows, the area of work in which I earn my living.

*Père Lachaise (final charcoal/red chalk version)*





I have always worked from the human figure and, earlier this year, I embarked on a large, very classical portrait which I entered, unsuccessfully, for the annual National Portrait Gallery Competition. It seemed to mark a turning point in my approach to my work, throwing me first of all into a period of retrospection and an analysis of my paintings so far. It became clear that what was missing was something beyond and below the surface of a painting, that I now needed to add a new dimension of depth, both physical and intellectual. 75

People who know me will see me as a politically active person, particularly in relation to human rights abuse across the world. Painting about such a powerfully emotive subject from the security of a quiet existence in Dover can never match the intensity a more immediate gut reaction would provoke. I am fortunate enough to be part of a convoy of people travelling to Romania at the end of January to take much-needed

equipment to a number of orphanages. On a humanitarian level, it will be a relief to offer physical help; as a painter, I hope my reaction to years of abuse of human rights will develop into a series of challenging and difficult paintings.

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