


ISSUE 06

SUMMER 2009

GRADUATE Q&A: SUSAN GUNN

NEW NUCA BRAND IDENTITY

GRADUATE PROFILE: ROBERT DEAS



NORWICH
UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE
OF THE ARTS

SUSAN GUNN

Artist Susan Gunn graduated with a First Class BA (Hons) Fine Art degree in 2004. In 2006, Susan won the prestigious Sovereign European Painting Prize and saw her work shown alongside Damien Hirst's. In November, Susan exhibited her work as part of 'Norfolk Painters 2008', a series of solo shows celebrating the work of painters in the eastern region held at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery. In this interview, Susan talks about why she took the decision to return to Art College, her experience since graduation and her plans for the future. Caroline Bailey asks the questions.

What made you decide to go back to Art College as a mature student?

I started a foundation course at Bolton Art School after my A levels but my parents were never convinced I would be able to make a proper living out of art. As a compromise I opened up my own wedding shop which allowed me to use my drawing and design skills and my business acumen. As you get older you start to question what your goals are in life. I always knew I had the potential and a lot of enthusiasm and energy for making art so when my husband Bryan's professional football playing career came to an end, it seemed the right time to explore my talent and where it could take me, so I enrolled onto the Foundation Course at the College in September 2000.

How did it feel to be back in education?

I felt like I had been given a second bite of the cherry by going back to Art College so I knew I had to make the most of the opportunity and work hard. It was quite daunting at first, especially being amongst younger students who had a different outlook to life and their art. It was good to have a mix of age groups on the course and I hope that being a bit older, I was a good influence on them. In my visitor's book at my Degree Show, I received some lovely comments from some of the other students on how I had been an inspiration to them, which was lovely to read. It was a struggle to balance making work, studying, and spending time with my family and to some extent I put my own life on hold for four years.

How did the Fine Art Course at NUCA develop you as an artist?

Before I went to Art College I felt very frustrated, I knew I had potential but my energy and enthusiasm was unfocused. Studying for a Fine Art degree enabled me to verbalise my ideas. I benefited from the crits with tutors and other students on my work. They make you question what you are doing, what is important to you as an artist. They push you but leave you to draw your own conclusions and I found that empowering. Visiting artists and lecturers provided an added perspective on my work, tutorials with them proved very motivational. Over the course of my degree I developed the confidence to communicate and justify my practice.

Do you feel your career has progressed quickly or has it been a slow process to get where you are today?

After graduating, I was accepted onto the Arts Council Escalator Award which was a new initiative

1 'Divided ground - Red', 2008.

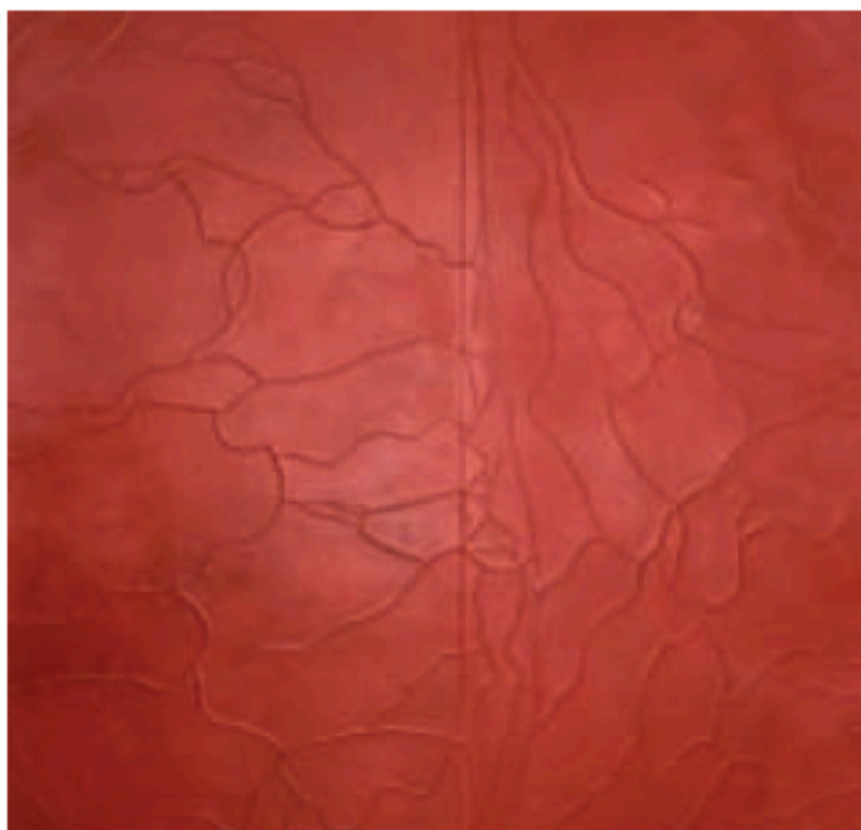
Wax, pigment & gesso on canvas
153 x 153 x 5.5cm

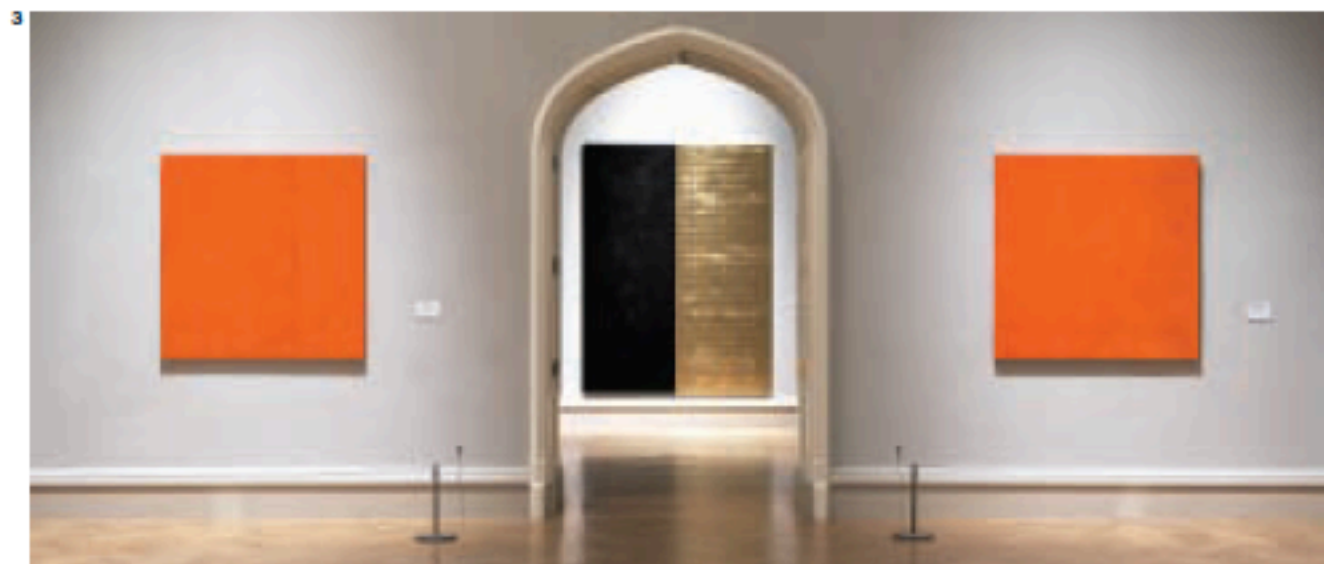
2 'Sacro Terra', 2005 (detail). Wax, pigment & gesso on canvas & board
122 x 153 x 5.5cm

3 Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery Solo Exhibition

Images by Pete Huggins

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to support emerging artists in the East. As part of this award, I created a series of paintings, 'Specto Specus I & II' to be exhibited as part of a group show titled 'Stay' in London. These paintings were then nominated for the Sovereign European Painting Prize 2006 by the Artist Colin Self and Cherry Smith, Curator of 'Stay'. I was amongst 300 artists being judged and I was amazed when I won. Winning the Sovereign Prize gave me recognition and was like a stamp of approval on my work, opportunities started to happen as a result.

It has been a slow process, in March 2009 I had an exhibition at Rollo Contemporary Art in London as a result of Simon Gillespie (Curator and Director) watching my progress over the past couple of years, so it certainly has not happened overnight.

What was it like to exhibit your paintings in 'Monochromed' alongside Damien Hirst, Lucio Fontana and Yves Klein?

Lucio Fontana is one of my lifelong heroes so to have my

work included in the same show as his was daunting but very exciting. His work inspired my gold leaf paintings, one in particular 'Ground Sacro Terra 07' which I painted specifically for the Salthouse Church exhibition in 2007 and was also a focal point of my show at Norwich Castle.

How did you get selected for the Norfolk Painters 2008 exhibition at the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery?

The East Anglian Art Fund identifies and promotes painting and artists in the region and was organising a series of solo shows at the Castle. They invited me to have a show along with Brüer Tidman and John Kiki which was a real honour. I had 18 months to produce new paintings for the exhibition.


I usually make a series of three paintings and each takes four to five months to prepare. I also had to promote the show and organise my own catalogue. It is so important to document your work so the

exhibition lives on long after the work has been taken down. To coincide with the show I launched my website so it all took a lot of planning. I also kept a video diary which is now available on YouTube.

What advice would you give to new graduates leaving the College this summer?

To be persistent, have self belief and document your work. You have to realise that Art is not immune from the vulgarities and prejudices of the real world. It is important to retain a degree of naivety and optimism.

Finally, what are your plans for the future?

The exhibition at the Castle took up a lot of my time and focus so it is nice to now be able to relax a little and to think about where I go next. I took part in Open Studios in May and I will apply for the John Moores painting prize and other events in the contemporary art world, so watch this space... 

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