

# Out & About

## Paintings of an art adventure

By Leah Seator

No one can dispute that Orkney is a stunning, beautiful place, rich in culture, and heritage, but how often do we, the people who live here, stop to appreciate it?

This is the very thought that came to me as I had lunch one Friday afternoon with American artist, Jeanne Rose, listening to her obvious passion for Orkney life, and the setting in which it exists.

But hers is no ordinary passion. In fact, it has become a lifelong love affair for the now retired teacher from Long Island, New York, which has fuelled much of her artwork, since her first visit here nearly 35 years ago.

She has returned as often as she can since then, and in 2005, Jeanne established the Orkney Art Adventures, spending summers here, teaching workshops to fellow students from abroad allowing them to experience the place for themselves.

She retired earlier this year, age 55, and, for the first time, inspired by locals who dared her to "spend a winter here," she has done just that.

She has been a winter artist in residence, living in the late Sylvia Wishart's home, Heatherbraes, in Stromness, overlooking Hoy — the most stunning view any artist with a burning desire to create would be inspired by.

She said: "I was trying to construct a method to carry out a plan I had, to make a long continuous panorama of undulating hills and sky. It would surround the three to four walls of a room, and then in the centre, banners of standing stones would hang.

"I have had this installation idea for a long time, but had had no time to pursue the where or the when of it. Somehow, this winter in Orkney seemed to be the correct time."

She hit the jackpot, when she was offered her current accommodation.

"Being a 16-year cancer survivor and a 33-year primary school teacher, it looked like retiring at 55 would be a good idea," she said.

"But a change from something so long term is hard. So, I came



A room with a view — sitting in the late Sylvia Wishart's chair, Jeanne Rose has found the stunning view of Hoy an endless source of inspiration, describing it as her "only TV channel."

(Pictures: Kenny Pirie)

to Orkney hoping maybe to be a supply teacher, and to take the dare of some local folks, to see what a winter here might be like.

"In looking for a winter let, magic happened, and I was led to the home and studio of the late Sylvia Wishart.

"Suddenly, supply teaching didn't seem to be the objective of life after retirement. Sylvia's studio had the big white wall I had imagined, for the large paintings I wanted to pursue with more time on my hands.

"I just hadn't thought that the space and time would happen in Orkney!

"Returning to finish my term was an absolute delight, as I explained to students that I was more than a teacher — they had amazed looks when I told them I had been painting all my life, and even more, when I tried to explain to them where Orkney was, and what standing stones were and why I was inspired by them."

"At first, it seemed like I would come for the regular six-month stay without a Visa, but I was able to get a proper Visa for two years, although I didn't have the heart to tell my family I might be gone that long.

"I started work on getting my West Highland terrier here,

and discovered that it would have been cheaper to go on the *Queen Mary* with a room-mate and my dog, than on the NY to Manchester flight I had to use!

"Friends from my year of exchange teaching in Paisley gave me a car, picked me up, and friends here, Neil Leask and fiancé Daisy Wood, met me at the ferry.

"About two to three weeks after I arrived the snow came, and I discovered the wonder of kind neighbours. I was snow-bound up my hill. Not because the diggers of Alan Craigie, or the OIC ploughs and gritters didn't come, but because I hadn't found my winter nerve up a hill, and was without snow tyres in Orkney yet.

"One passing walker (a whole lot of folks seem to like walking through drifted snow and blowing winds, and anytime I saw someone outside my window, I invited them in for a chat and cup of tea) turned out to have the skills and ingenuity to figure a way to rig up the studio, with a system enabling me to use large rolled canvas.

"From Robin Bownass and Joan, to the Fletts of Stang farm and neighbouring Ted and Margaret Hare, I was helped to get provisions, chat, and even

*The Orcadian* was brought up

my hill."

Soon, the work began to take shape, as Jeanne became more and more inspired by her surroundings.

She said: "I spent a great number of days sitting in Sylvia's chair, watching the only TV channel up here — the hills of Hoy, its weather and the sea, accompanied by the whistling roar of the wind in the chimney.

"Being somewhat familiar with Sylvia's work, an idea arose to study Hoy, and to use it as the undulating hills in my panorama.

"With an ingenious system of broom handles, and empty chain spoons seized from Wishart's, designed by a helpful walker By my window, who also helped me change an outside light bulb, the canvas has been unrolling in six-foot sections across the studio wall.

"I am using un-stretched rolled and primed canvas. I create pencil sketches, and follow up with a series of colour sketches using oil crayons or Cray-pas.

"Then I charcoal in my plan on the tacked-on canvas roll. I use R+F oil pigment sticks to apply the colour where I want it. "It usually resembles scribbling. Then I use a medium to speed up drying time, and I blend the colours directly onto the canvas. I do use some tube oils to augment certain areas.

"I prefer working this way to using a traditional palette, because I enjoy the total freedom and spontaneity it allows. It also helps the overall feel of the work to be more free.

"I have completed five sections, and anticipate two more. One, to two, of the standing stone banners is completed, and next, where to hang it and how to hang?

"I have an idea that it will only be viewed a few times, and then I will probably cut it into the sections as painted, and hope to sell them individually.

"Only a school or an office building could handle the full panorama, and I don't have any contacts for that to happen."

If a space can be found, the piece will no doubt impress viewers, for its sheer size alone. Having only seen one six-foot section, I can only imagine the wonder of it, shown at its full 24-foot potential.

Jeanne uses an uncanny ability with colour, to highlight pieces of the spectacular view, and she admits, while it is a full-time source of entertainment, she still

manages to see something new in it every day.

But it isn't just about the art. Jeanne embraces, and absorbs community life, channelling her experiences into her work.

She said: "Part of my philosophy guiding my painting of here, a place I have not been born into, is that to be inspired by the beauty of the landscape here is one thing.

"It is greatly enriched and enlivened by connecting with the people who are rooted and integrated into that very landscape. Perhaps that is why I am so interested in seeing the social parts of an Orkney life.

"Christo (the environmental artist) documents all the processes building up to his final act of hanging the fabric *Gates in Central Park*, New York as the art. Many current artists labour over making their own pigmented paints.

"For me, it is being immersed in the fabric of the daily life here, thus I visit and tour a neighbour's cattle farm, attend the Strathspey Reel concert, join a Sunday bird watching group, see the films at the Stromness "Royal Film Harmonic," and why I have joined the Stromness Writing Group, the Song Shop Choir, and attend the Royal Hotel folk nights and the Orkney Traditional Dance Group festival week!

"I organised those kinds of experiences when I did the Orkney Arts Adventure workshops at Woodwick House, from 2005-2008.

"In 2009, I helped Mary Leask and Greta Craigie put on a display of their life with crafts at the Masonic Hall.

"I visit with Greta every week while I am here, and we enjoy a meal. Scrabble and conversation. I see my buddy, Neil Leask, often, as he and his fiancée visited me in New York just after my retirement in July 2010.

"And now in 2010 /2011, it is about putting some time into me, and exploring painting larger and enjoying all the events, activities and people that are here.

"I was invited to talk about the

watercolour white-line work in January at the Firth SWRI.

"In between this large painting, I have created some smaller ones now in the Waterfront spring exhibition.

"I have been working on small watercolours, and the watercolour white-line woodblock, that I taught in the Orkney Art Workshops at Woodwick House.

"Some of those are in the Odin Stone. I welcome visitors to the studio, but will only be here until April 28, but I am not leaving yet. I will be moving down into Stromness, into the Gatehouse, directly behind the Stromness Hotel."

While she will be sad to leave her view, Jeanne hopes to have a whole new experience in this accommodation in the centre of Stromness, and will hopefully host workshops there too.

"I have furnished my next place via numerous charity shops and the *Bruck Programme*, on Radio Orkney," she said.

"I also visited Steptozeyard in Stromness, as whatever I need and use can be returned for another's use when I finally take leave of Orkney for the long term.

"I sure look forward to experiencing winter in the town, as opposed to the Outertown experience I had this year, but I really wanted to stay here overlooking Hoy. I just couldn't find a place to stay. I will be offering watercolour white-line workshops in the Gatehouse, for two to three people at a time. If anyone is interested, please call 07900982612, or 851 176, in May."

The present owners of Heatherbraes were friends of Sylvia Wishart for over 30 years, and hope that other artists may be inspired to take up a winter residence there.

Jeanne added: "They very much appreciate an artist-in-residence for the winter. The Pier Arts Centre has also placed artists in residence here, and will continue to do so. Anyone for whom this appeals, can get in touch via [www.mail@woodend-barn.co.uk](mailto:www.mail@woodend-barn.co.uk)."



Jeanne is pictured here painting the latest of her six-foot canvas sections of her continuous panorama painting of the hills of Hoy, which will eventually measure 24 feet long.



Seeing things in a new light — Jeanne displays one of her painted Standing Stones, at the very entrance of Heatherbraes, where she has been artist in residence over the winter.