

Intense connections with the landscape

Paul Finn's paintings are expressive, intuitive renditions of the landscape. The locations emerge as distinctive and personal oil paintings, with more going on than at first it might seem, as Susie Hodge discovers

Most of Paul Finn's works derive from memories gathered from experiences and observations, absorbed and assimilated. He has worked as an artist and teacher for the whole of his career. As a result, his work is optimistic, appreciative and considered, inspired by artists including Samuel Palmer, Paul Nash, David Bomberg and Eric Ravilious.

'I had always had a secret wish to go to the Slade and it was there that I met William Coldstream, Keith Vaughan, Lawrence Gowing, Jeffrey Camp, Bernard Cohen and Malcolm Hughes, who ran the postgrad course and helped develop my work. At the Slade we never discussed how to build a

career as an artist and if I have one criticism, it's that. In many ways we weren't taught anything, but there was a purpose and a direction to the discussions. After the Slade I was appointed Brinkley Fellow at Norwich School of Art.'

Colour balance

Rather than painting certain areas in sequence, Paul prefers to paint the total image, constantly working across his pictures. 'My working method is a rigorous one. I can't paint from direct observation – there is too much information to take in. I draw and observe and walk, returning to places many times and I need time to

evaluate what I have observed, and decide how to depict the landscape. There is no recipe to the way I paint; I just try to answer questions arising from the experience of looking.

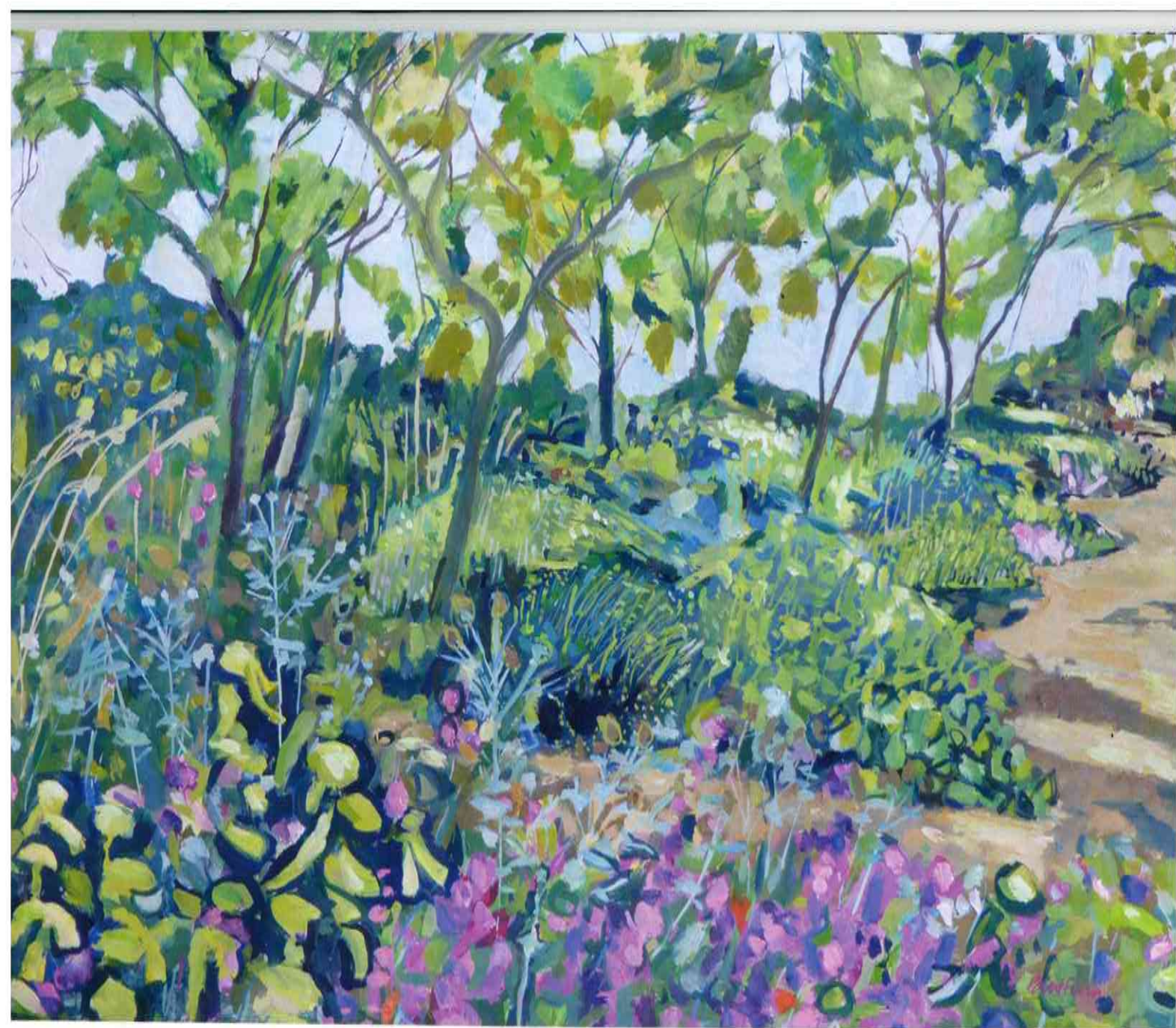
'The paintings undergo many changes and refinements during their making. Often I will scrape away and repaint and start again and this can happen right at the end of the process. I enjoy the uncertainties of oil paint and use a whole range of implements with which to apply it, from decorators' brushes to sign-writers' brushes and Chinese brushes. This keeps the surface animated and moving.

'I use Michael Harding oils and have recently bought Old Holland and



▲ *Château Rose, Provence*, oil on board, 19¼×33½in (50×85cm).

Paul's juxtaposed complementaries are from a palette reminiscent of Cézanne. 'I rarely use secondary colours, and like to mix colours wet-into-wet directly onto the surface. I might start with very light colours – here a lemon yellow mixed with white – and then slowly add darker tones. This way I can achieve change and dynamic contrasts fairly quickly.'



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Roberson's. Oil paint allows me to rearrange things, to repaint them and to cancel things out. On the last count I had over 20 yellows and 20 blues. I have four or five reds, rose madder and so on, and then the earth tones, Payne's grey and the neutrals. You can mix black with yellows to create some unbelievable greens. Recently I have been playing with Payne's grey, burnt sienna and Naples yellow to create some interesting dark areas. If you add white you can make fantastic greys; it makes a nice alternative to raw umber, French ultramarine and white. I mix my paints on a traditional palette or on a sheet of glass that has been placed on a piece of paper that is the same colour as the ground I am painting on. This way I can immediately see the colour balance.

'My overriding interest is in simultaneous contrast, so I combine

tonal, warm/cool and complementary contrasts in the same work. Hence my reason for so many different versions of the same colour. I'm still learning after 30 years' painting!

Visual cohesion

Paul's work also develops instinctively. 'When I decide I want to paint somewhere I visit, a lengthy creative process which is emotional, intellectual and physical begins. I tend to be attracted by pattern and structure, but my work is not a topographical account of a place. I want to sum up the atmosphere and memories of a place and this is done in the tranquillity of my studio. I try to create a visual cohesion and balance in my work and I want my decisions to be visible, so I enjoy making busy surfaces that might have thick and thin paint.

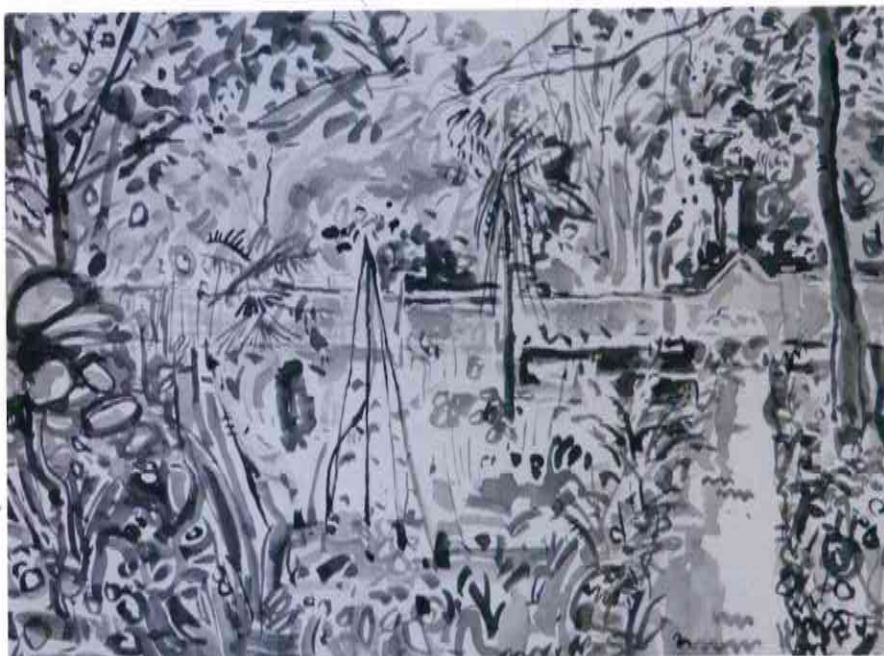
'In terms of composition, I want

▲ *Gravel Garden (2)*, oil on gesso panel, 19½×23½in (50×60cm).

This is part of an extended series of paintings.

'I like it when my painting straddles the opposing fields of flatness and illusion – you see a familiar scene but when you look again you see marks, patches of colour and paint, and then you see the depicted image again. Scale plays an important part and composition is a balancing act. I tend to want to use elements that overlap, have a size difference and are painted from slightly different angles and viewpoints; this creates movement and gives the work visual strength.'

variety and balance. In the past I have painted field patterns, but recently in my garden paintings there is so much going on and so much movement, it's a case of guiding the eye over and through the painting. I feel free to edit



▲ *Warley Place*, ink on paper, 9½×11in ((24×28cm).
Paul captures exotic trees and what remains of the buildings in this *plein-air* sketch



▲ *Over Tuscan Roofs*, woodcut, 5¼×7in (13×18cm).
Sometimes Paul's drawings are extended into woodblock prints, as here

and change. I'm not interested so much in copying a scene in front of me because the scene will always be stronger than the painting. Studio reinvention allows me to make strong paintings that may seem simple, but they do not give up their secrets too quickly, you have to work at looking. Effects of light, combinations of tones colour and shape all play their part. I sometimes think that colours get all the credit in a painting, when in fact it is the tone that does all the hard work.'

Letting go

'I work exclusively on landscapes and

enjoy working from familiar places. For recording initial ideas, I tend to use ink, but have used chisel markers, and I might take a photograph. Not every study becomes a painting and I am sure that old studies will be looked at again for new paintings. My best work comes as a result of letting go completely and giving myself up to the paint. Sometimes a painting almost makes itself and when I am brave enough I can paint vigorously, making free marks with little regard for the end product.

'I paint quickly and urgently, stopping to see what I have achieved when I

have reached an impasse. Looking and thinking last longer than the activity of painting. Often I have only a rough idea of what I want to achieve. I don't make a careful linear drawing and then fill it in with paint, that wouldn't satisfy me at all. In a painting the paint is the thing.'

With his instinctive, intuitive approach, Paul says he sees the rules of linear perspective a distraction, but might use aerial perspective and work with warmth and coolness. 'My paintings are quite small, purely because the galleries I show in are small. Recently I have been painting on gesso panels but have done many paintings on linen canvas, which I attach to a panel later. Often, I will start a painting and put it to one side, only to return to it later. My initial thoughts are to just get rid of the white and to find a place for a mark and a colour. Once I am painting on top of paint, I am happier.

'Recently, I have made drawings in charcoal on the painting surface and then used Lascaux fixative to avoid the charcoal affecting the clarity of the colours. I then find a place for a mark and a colour, getting them down as quickly as I can. Stangely, I have been working in the opposite tones to those in the final painting, so a light area will have been dark in the early stages. I think this makes the lights lighter somehow, and the darks more intense. I usually start with large brushes and then finish with smaller ones. There tends to be little detail early on. I leave the paintings alone when I think I have finished, but will look at them over weeks as I work on others. I may make a few changes but I won't tinker with them. If I think the painting isn't finished I might repaint the whole thing.'

Influences and inspiration

Not consciously aware of developing a style, Paul works fairly spontaneously and uninhibitedly. 'Thankfully people tell me that they can recognise my paintings, which is lovely. My favourite artists are quite diverse, including: Peter Prendergast, Paul Cézanne, Pierre Bonnard, Ken Auster, Annabel Keatley, Huw Morgan, Robert Newton, David Wiseman, Rembrandt, Frank Auerbach and Melissa Scott-Miller.

'I like to get my work shown as much as possible and I always have work at the galleries where I am a permanent artist. I have lots of things in the pipeline, including a drawing trip to Tuscany, walking between Florence and Pienza and then working in Provence on some more new ideas.'



▲ *Beth Chatto's Garden*, oil on board, 17×63½in (43×60cm).

'For me, the mark and the surface are the primary means of communication. I like to drag the paint around, and once it is on the surface, I might use a knife to scrape the paint back, only to layer more paint, and so the painting slowly becomes itself. I work unselfconsciously, trying to bring a sense of order to a work, and the tools I use are merely there to help me do this.'

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Paul Finn

After a classical education in Bradford, Paul Finn attended Ravensbourne College of Art and the Slade. He has shown throughout the UK and in Europe, including London's Royal Academy of Art, Whitechapel, Rowley, New Grafton and Hayward galleries, and with the New English Art Club and the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours. Paul is planning to submit work to the Royal Institute of Oil Painters. He also takes commissions. www.paulfinn.co.uk.



▲ *Pencaer*, oil on board, 23½×29in (60×74cm).

'I am attracted to subject matter which is either a wild place, or where nature has been tended and managed by man. Even in Pencaer and Garn Fawr there are remnants of our attempts to organise the landscape.'