

Solitary striding

Cheltenham artist Jo Biggadike talks to Katie Jarvis about the Cotswold walks which inspire her printmaking.



A Memory of Swifts by Jo Biggadike, collagraph print

The scene is shades of blue: a base of deep Prussian that refracts and morphs into myriad tints of inky sky and metallic wisps of silvery cloud. And then there's the movement. Black darts of birds – dusky swifts – swirling over the tip of a towering weathervane, before heading off on a journey, destination known only to them.

Printmaker Jo Biggadike was walking – as is her wont – on Leckhampton Hill, at the time. One of those lazy summer days, with no one else in sight: 'It was very peaceful. Then, suddenly, all these birds came swooping overhead. A magical moment – me and these birds – a moment it felt as if they'd gifted to me.'

Swifts are the fastest of skilled aviators, pretty much impossible to catch in a photograph. 'Or to draw,' Jo says. 'So the print I made of that moment is called A Memory of Swifts. I had to remember the sight and the feeling. The beauty and the elation.'

Jo started her pattern of walking and drawing during a master's course in illustration at the University of Gloucestershire. A textile-designer by trade (she studied at Chelsea School of Art, working for many years as an in-house fabric designer at John Lewis), the degree course reflected her desire to return to art after time off with her children.

Tutors encouraged Jo to get out into the landscape in which she lives. To look; to draw; to really 'see'. 'I used to rely on photographs before my master's. And I do still use photos as reference. But I've discovered that your eye sees something different from the camera. I'd find that I'd look at a photo and think, 'That's really not what I was seeing.'

And so Jo began her walks through Cotswold countryside, drinking in everything she saw: above, below, ❖

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Jo often sketches outside during her walks

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in front of her. Being on her own was important, too.

'It's being still and quiet that gives you these things. One day, I was drawing under a tree. I looked up – and there was a woodpecker sitting looking at me.'

She found that known landscapes became unfamiliar as seasons changed. The blue of flax, the yellow of rape, ceding to burnt rusts of autumn.

Jo's defining moment came when she realised she could turn those

drawings into signed, limited prints, and greetings cards, which she sells through her business, TheAmblingPress. 'I'm a printmaker at heart,' she says. 'I use a collagraph process – a non-toxic version of etching – with card on which I can create textures. There are all sorts of different ways of achieving texture and quality: perhaps using glue; or by cutting to create darker areas.'

'The fascinating part is that there are so many influences you haven't got



Winter Woods, collagraph print



Jo in her Cheltenham studio



control of – a texture, or the way colours blend: a fusion between you and the collagraph process. When you first peel back, you're not sure what you're going to get. There's always that excitement of: Wow! I didn't expect that!

Originally from Lancashire, Jo came to Gloucestershire – via London – 18 years ago. 'And as I've explored, I've come to love the landscape. Maybe I look at it in a different way. When you're born somewhere, it can sometimes be hard to see the very thing that's in front of you.'

'Even now, I can be in the same place two days running and see a completely different scene: the colour, the light, the weather.'

And there are still elements to discover, even after 18 years.

'Recently, I saw my first hare. They're a real symbol of Gloucestershire. We never had them in London; never had them in Lancashire, either. But there it was, very much in the distance, right over the other side of a field. It was such an exciting moment. Now I'm just waiting to see one close to.'

For more information about Jo and her work, visit www.amblingpress.co.uk



Amongst the Wild Garlic, collagraph print