



An Island Escape



Exploring shape, colour and the art of simplicity with painter *Ellie Verrecchia*.
For Ellie, the Isles of Scilly's shoreline has harboured inspiration ever since she was a child.





"I've been coming here since the age of eleven. Some of my earliest island memories are of walking the beaches and finding things. I'd bring them back and lay them all out, with my antique dealer Dad saying, 'that one's a 16th century piece of glass from a Dutch wine jar', or 'that's a fragment from a 500-year-old bellarmine jug.'

"I'm really interested in beachcombing – particularly on Scilly, where you find things that have quite possibly come from wrecks. I find that really fascinating; seeing the marks of how people have lived here on the coast."

Today, Ellie is a respected contemporary artist, creating seascapes that are exhibited at leading coastal galleries (including our own Gallery Tresco) and receiving Arts Council England funding to develop her creative practice into 2023. In addition to this, she teaches painting through the National Trust and is currently undertaking a year's Studio Practice with Newlyn School of Art. Needless to say, she's never been busier.

Though she lives on the mainland, in Devon, when I catch up with her she's on Tresco and in the midst of leading a series of painting workshops for the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust's Festival of Nature. For an artist inspired by the shore, it's an ideal place to be.

"Tresco is a place I love to explore. I have a kind of rich Tresco map ingrained in my memory, with each place providing a unique set of colours, textures and seascape views to inspire new work."

This relationship has led Ellie to paint numerous pieces depicting Tresco. Her first, a painting on driftwood created in 2018, was bought within hours and is now part of the Tresco Estate collection, displayed on the wall of the Lighthouse cottage.

It's fair to say that she's becoming something of an islander in her own right. As we're talking, she's on her third of four painting visits – including two art residencies – scheduled for this year alone. And with the weather changing here from one hour to the next, each of Ellie's paintings is as individual as the scene it depicts.

"Within one day, you can have every kind of weather. If you're in the lee of the wind, behind a big granite boulder, with the sun shining, you can take your jumper off in December and feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. Even in a deep storm, you still have that amazing turquoise on the sea. I actually love those dark days when everything's rolling in off the Atlantic. It's such an elemental place to be."

Of course, painting on an island also has its logistical wrinkles, but for Ellie, this is part of the creative challenge.

"Because I'm travelling on foot or by bike, I plan my day around the weather and the tides. Travelling to islands for art means I've got to bring everything I may need with me. It has to be small enough to go on a small plane or helicopter, and then be carried around on my back. I like that this connects me to the resourceful spirit of the community that lives here year-round. I'm never happier than when I'm working here, and I take on the challenges with a smile!"

Once she's arrived on the island, Ellie's natural instincts as a collector can be given free rein. Along the shoreline, she seeks out driftwood and metal that has washed ashore, using these – as well as cotton papers and natural birch board – as evocative canvases for her work.

She also "collects" colour, taking samples of sand from her favourite beaches and making in-situ colour charts that she can work from when she's back at home. Each location has its own set of specific colours, as Ellie explains:

Good design is using the least design possible, so I try to keep only things that tell the story of this place. The challenge is in deciding what not to include.

"I've got a series of four colour palettes that I made on Tresco. They're all very different because the time of day, the weather and the season makes each moment unique. What's also interesting is that sea glass here is a totally different colour to the sea glass I find in south Devon. There's more aqua and turquoise sea glass on the islands than anywhere else I've ever been, and it matches the palette so brilliantly."

"Colour is so important to me", she adds. "I want to get it right."

While Ellie's out in the landscape, she'll also make a pared-back sketch of its features for future reference.

"Good design is using the least design possible, so I try to keep only things that tell the story of this place. The challenge is in deciding what not to include. Simple, very clean marks, with no need for detail. I'm not interested in painting a photograph."

And yet, Ellie's paintings have become much-loved representations of Scilly, with her deliberately clean and simple style evoking memories and becoming what she describes as "a piece of a place" for many.

"I want to make a painting that's evocative, where our imaginations do the work to fill in the memories that we have of this place. I'm always most pleased with the paintings that have the fewest marks, because those are the most successful ones for me."

For the last four years, Ellie's work has been showcased at Gallery Tresco, and says she loves the fact that it's "about ten steps from the sea". As I'm writing, she's busy working on her 2023 collection for the gallery, and full of excitement for the opportunities still to come.

"The way that Tresco Estate champions art is really quite something. It's the centrepiece of the cottages, and adds a rich layer of experience to being on the islands. Anna Parkes, manager of Gallery Tresco, has the most incredible eye and has been an invaluable sounding board and mentor for my creative practice."

While selling through the gallery, Ellie also receives commissions, often from those for whom Tresco has become an equally treasured place.

"I'm often asked to paint a certain spot or beach; for instance, if someone proposed there and wants to give a painting for their anniversary. Tresco is such a special place for those life moments, and this love of it is passed down through the generations too. It's lovely to be a part of capturing that for people who love the island as much as I do."



*You can see more of Ellie's work at
Gallery Tresco, or on Instagram*

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