



KELLY STEWART: ON OLD BUILDINGS, PERFECTING THE IMPERFECT & THE IMPORTANCE OF PRINT

In 2000 Kelly was drawn from Sydney, Australia to Edinburgh by the pull of European architecture. 16 years on Kelly is thriving as a professional artist creating complex multi-layered Screen prints inspired by her architectural discoveries all over Europe. Smithson catches up with Kelly during her visit to Bristol and Bath where she has been exploring and sketching in preparation for a new body of work.



You have been in Bristol & Bath preparing for a new series of work. Tell us about how you get your teeth into a city and how you select the areas you want to draw?

For me it's about getting to know a city really well. I walk all of the streets then pick the little quirky corners, sets of buildings or areas that inspire me. Quite often they're the ends of long rows of buildings. I'll then do little sketches to record ideas of how I might like to represent an area and make it my own, and I will take lots of photographs.

So how do you make what you are drawing your own?

I will take details that I find interesting, maybe a window, the overall shape of a building or a doorway for example, and make more of a feature of it by playing around with the scale and distorting it slightly. Then I'll think about how I'm going to screen print it, making notes about the colours I might to use to highlight certain features, or details I want to emphasise.

Do you always sketch on location as well as photograph?

It's nice to be able to sketch on location, in order to record my thoughts and ideas at the time, photographs are sometimes not enough. In Bristol and Bath the cities feel compact and familiar, I can connect the streets together in my mind, and this allows me time to draw. But I remember being in Rome and Paris and feeling so overwhelmed by the size of the cities that I didn't feel I had the time to sketch, so I just had to see and photograph as much as possible and then draw when I got home.



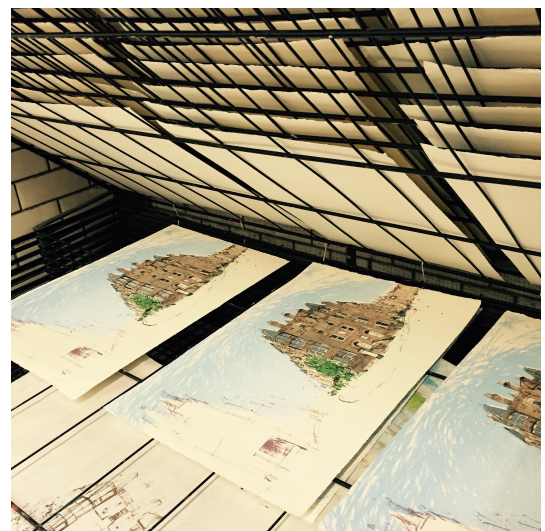
Are the colours you use in your screen prints based on reality?

If it's the colour that particularly strikes me about an area I'll try to keep it true to reality because that's what I liked about it in the first instance, and it will be recognisable for the locals. However, I've been drawing Edinburgh for a while now, I'm familiar with the colours of the city, therefore I enjoy experimenting with colour, and finding different ways of expressing what I see.

Screen printing is very integral to your work.

Why do you chose to put your drawings though the medium of screen printing?

I love screen printing because I can add texture and various marks to make the whole image more interesting. I tend to find mediums like watercolour a little bit limiting because I can't create mark making in the same way. With screen printing I can add text, I can play with different colour options, I can flesh out the image with ideas and mark making, and I find that very exciting.



When did you discover screen printing?

I studied illustration in Australia, and we did a bit of screen printing during one semester. The next semester our lecturer asked who wanted to do screen printing, and it was only me who put my hand up! I thought 'I don't understand how nobody else wants to do this!? How does nobody else find this the most exciting thing in the world?' We didn't get to do it after that because I was the only one who was interested in pursuing it. Then I moved to Edinburgh and it was my second cousin, who lived in Pittenweem at the time, who said 'you'd probably really like Edinburgh printmakers' which I did, so I joined within a year of being in Edinburgh and I haven't looked back since.



Have you experimented with different mediums of print?

Yes, I have tried most others. I've tried linocut, but I miss the drawing element in that. I've tried etching but it tightens me up too much because the tools are quite fine. Lithography I absolutely love for the line, but it just takes way too long to produce one layer and sometimes I produce 30 layers in a print, so it's not right for me. Screen printing just ticks all my boxes, it's versatile, ideal for fast workers and those who love to draw. I love it!



When did you decide to bring text in to your images?

I think I have always included text, even when I was back at university. I generally don't like when things are absolutely perfect and polished, I prefer a little bit of rawness. I like my work to look a bit like a page out of a sketchbook and I think the text helps convey this.

What is important to you about creating an original, limited edition print?

It's a big thing for me. I don't even get my cards digitally printed, I screen print them by hand

too, which I know in this day and age seems a bit crazy. I believe that the work that goes in to a screen print is like a form of artwork itself, it's a type of expression, it's like painting or any other medium that involves a process. In terms of creating editions, I think for the amount of work that's involved in printing 30 hand generated layers on to one piece of paper, you wouldn't just do one, so I do an edition of 20 or 30, but never more than 50 so they are still very special. It saddens me when people dismiss my screen prints as giclee prints. Quite often people will ask if I have the originals of the prints and I try to explain to them that the original is broken up in to 30 individual layers of black ink on transparent film, of which I throw out when I'm finished. It's the sole reason why I made a video showing the process from drawing in my studio at home, through to the final screen print at the print studio. I'm hoping that people will understand that it's not a reproduction, but an original print. Every print is handmade.



In terms of your subject matter, where did your interest in architecture start?

I first started sketching old buildings at the beginning of university, but in Sydney Australia there weren't many old ones that inspired me. I remember when I was about 9 there was a church down the road that was about 100 years old, and word got around that it was due to be demolished. That little church was probably the oldest thing I'd ever seen in my life at the time. Nobody really protested against it, and it was bulldozed in the middle of the night! I remember how sad it made me feel to see it demolished, it was a loss to the community.

What sparked your decision to leave?

Whilst studying at university I worked in a framing shop where people would often bring in European imagery and this really interested me. Another girl who worked there had just returned from traveling around Europe and would say 'Oh that's Charles Bridge in Prague' and tell me stories of when she visited, which inspired me to go. I bought a one-way ticket and that

was it. Arriving in Europe was the most exciting moment of my life. I couldn't get the smile off my face for the first three months! I headed to Edinburgh because my Grandfather lived up north at the time. I thought I'd stay three months and it's now been almost 16 years.

And at that point were you set on a career as an artist?

Oh absolutely, I have always wanted to be an artist, there was always a driving force inside me. My parents thought it would be a good idea for me to do a typing course so that I had that to fall back on, but I made sure I never knew how to type, so I didn't ever have to fall back on it!



You mentioned earlier that you like a sense of imperfection, but yet there is a lot of perfection in terms of how you present your work and yourself as a professional artist. Everything is beautifully executed with great attention to detail, even the little things like the hand printed cards and notes you send with every artwork delivery.

Many artists have such a bad reputation for being unprofessional, so I make sure that I'm as professional as possible. It's important because I take it seriously, and I want other people to take me seriously too. For a long time I was striving towards perfection in my work, and that used to be a real struggle. Now I realise that the most interesting things aren't perfect and I really love that.

You sometimes refer to yourself as an illustrator. Do you consider yourself an artist or an illustrator?

That's an interesting one, because I studied as an illustrator rather than a fine artist I never did field work, I never got to go out and draw landscapes and cityscapes, so my way of working is down to my training. I'm working now as more of an artist, I love the randomness of not having the same day every day, without the pressure of tight deadlines, and with more freedom, which enables my work to evolve over time.

Do you go back to Australia often and do you draw when you are out there?

Yes, every two years or so. On my previous trip I started an outback series, and that was really great. I got into drawing landscapes in 2009 when I was in Spain, I loved the landscape there, it was really flat with clumps of shrub, and the outback is a bit like that, just a different colour. I absolutely loved it, I just did it for the joy of it, without having the pressure of it having to sell.

Do you have any aspirations or ideas for future work?

The other thing I love to draw is animals and I'm currently working on drawing 101 dogs for a book. With regards to future work I'd like to loosen up even more, but in terms of projects it's quite an organic process. I'm really excited about getting back from this trip and producing a new body of work for Smithson.

What do you get out of being an artist?

People will often say 'oh your very lucky, you spend your life doing something you love' which is true, but it is also hard work. I start at 10am and work until 9pm most nights, 6 days a week. I love it so much, it has become my lifestyle. I think that being able to do what it is that feeds my soul is great. At the end of the day I consider myself extremely fortunate that people love to buy what I love to draw.



Kelly Stewart's artworks are available to buy online from Smithson Gallery.
Click the following link to browse the collection:

<http://www.smithsongallery.co.uk/collections/kelly-stewart>