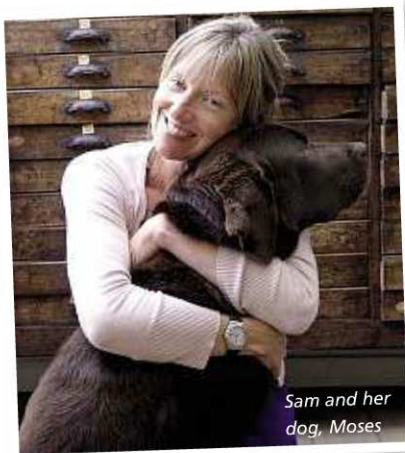


Imaginary friends

Brighton-based artist Sam Toft talks to *Laura Cartledge* about the characters in her work and the unusual things that inspire her, from the weather to the smell of apple pie



Sam and her dog, Moses

Sam Toft creates much more than artwork; she has crafted her own wonderful world.

It is inhabited by a charming and unusual array of characters, including Mr Mustard, Violet, Doris the dog, a vain short-sighted sheep called Audrey and Rover the very small goldfish.

It goes without saying that the pieces also have a great sense of humour, which could have something to do with the way Sam approaches her work.

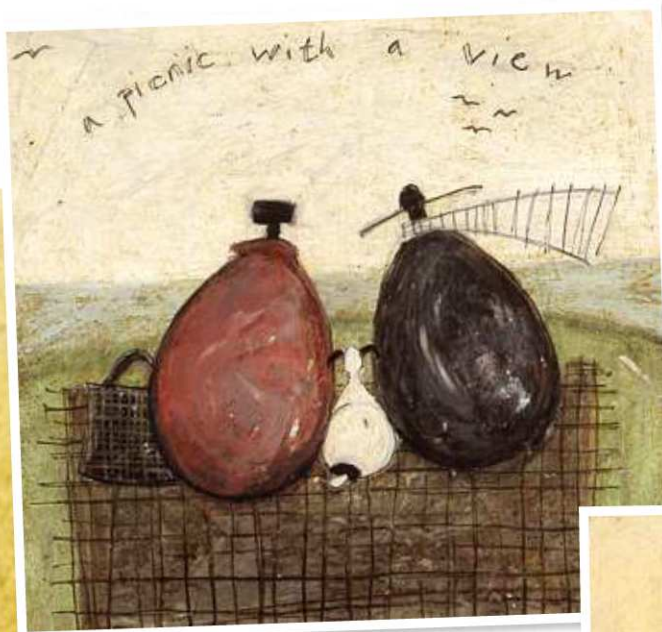
"I do it with light-heartedness and a smile on my face," she explains. "I cannot paint when I feel sad."

Combine this with a muted palette of colours, layers of texture, classic scenes of the coast and beyond and it is easy to see why Sam's work is so popular.

"I am very fortunate to be painting a band of imaginary friends, some based on my own character traits and flaws," adds Sam. "It's not uncommon for people to have a whole wall of my pictures, or to have them all over their house like wallpaper. I feel so flattered."

Sam has such a distinctive style and flair for art it is hard to imagine her doing anything else. But it was working in personnel, having studied for a degree in social sciences at Kingston Polytechnic, that inspired her to pick up a paintbrush.

"I had hit a low with my job, but I do not regret that degree as I learned a lot about business, marketing and, crucially, that I did not belong working in an



(Clockwise from left)
Searching for Doris;
A Picnic with a View;
Checking up on the Little
Tree; Lean on Me

I cannot
 paint when
 I feel sad



around or clearing up," explains Sam. "I start with a simple pencil drawing on board, then use oil pastels to block in the colours, adding washes of coloured inks on top.

"Depending on the weather and the temperature in the studio, the oil and ink washes mix and repel to varying degrees, so it's almost impossible to get the same effect twice.

"When the layers are dry I scrape back with forks and knives, or a damp cloth, and rework the surface using soft pencils, scratchy drawing nibs, thicker ink layers and Chinese black ink. Sometimes there are thumb prints, sometimes paint splatters with an old tooth brush, it varies."

Inspiration all around

Sam says music is a big inspiration for her work. "Sometimes a line in a song or a snippet of conversation can make a title for a piece," she says.

"What I love most about art is what I love most about music, and good food, and close friends – their ability to take me out of myself.

"I have spent a lot of my life working as a waitress or in offices pushing paper around. I know all about clock watching and alienation! I never forget how hard it was just to earn the money I needed to pay the rent.

"I was absolutely determined to try, try and try again to make a living doing what I liked most – making pictures."

Looking at Sam's work it is clear her local environment also plays a big part in her pictures.

"I have two dogs so I walk by the sea most days, and on the downs on the others," she says. "I am inspired by the colours of the weather and the reflections of the sky on the landscape.

"Anything from children's rhymes to the smell of apple pie! I guess it's often the feelings these things evoke that I try to translate into pictures."

Sam's characters have also been given a life beyond the page, with help

office," she says.

"That experience helped give me the drive I needed to succeed in my chosen career – that of an artist.

Unusual tools

"So I attended an art class at Liverpool City College. I had a wonderful tutor named Ian Hering, who also ran the Liverpool Cartoon Workshop.

"With an awful lot of help and encouragement from my tutors, I developed the style of working that I still use today," recalls Sam.

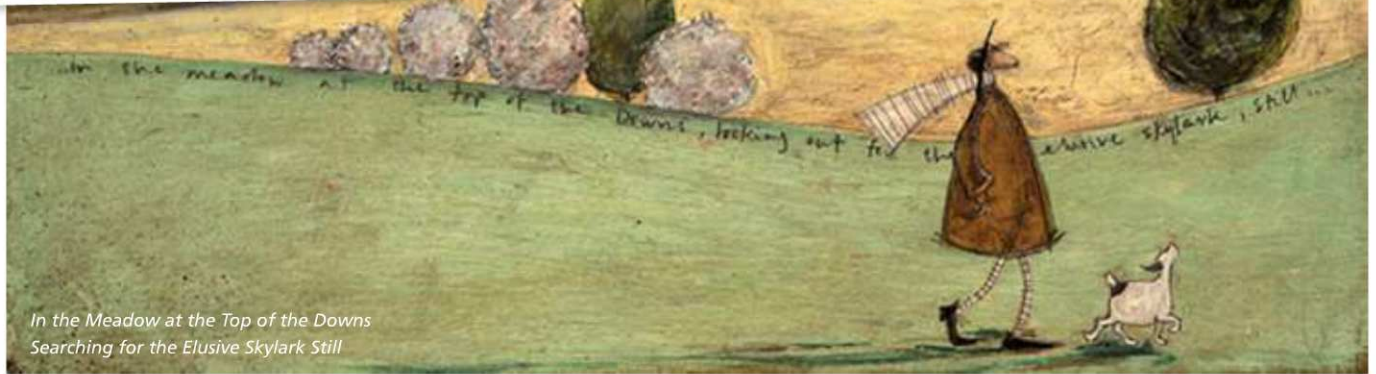
"I remember Pam Bann coming in one day and plonking a big box of random, half-used materials on my desk," she recalls. "Everything from inks, paints, crayons, powders to string, waxes, knives, forks and toothbrushes. And encouraging me to just play around for a few weeks and see!"

What came out of the playing was a technique that helps to give depth and texture to Sam's beautifully simple drawings.

"It's a bit like print making in its 'accidental' quality, but without the waiting



The Orange and the Blue



In the Meadow at the Top of the Downs
Searching for the Elusive Skylark Still

from craft courses at West Dean College, which have helped transform them into puppets and even sculptures.

"Last night I did a performance of storytelling and puppetry in a small local venue," explains Sam. "I guess I consider myself to be an introverted extrovert. A closet performer... and now I'm out of the closet."

Branching out

Looking to the future, it sounds like the adventures for Mr Mustard and friends are just beginning. "I have grand aspirations for my characters," says Sam with a smile. "I would like them to travel the world and beyond."

"I would love to find quality licensing opportunities for stationery products, soft toys and bone china tea sets. Or a really nice professional book maybe or even a television series or a film."

"But perhaps most seriously I'd like to find representation by a major London gallery to take my original work to places I could not imagine."

"I have hired gallery space in London and organised my own shows, which have been very successful, but it gets a bit hard doing the pushing all of the time."

I'm an
introverted
extrovert

"Not that I'm complaining. I love the places I've scrambled to reach, and I am always so surprised and proud when I come across my work in a shop, gallery, airport, far flung city. I just have my eye on the next rung of the ladder."

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■ Sam Toft will be holding open studios for one weekend in December as part of Brighton Artists' Open Houses at Christmas. Visit www.aoh.org.uk

■ New limited edition prints will be out next year, with a launch at the NEC in February. Sam will also be having a one woman show with John Noott Galleries at Broadway Modern Gallery in Worcestershire in June 2012.

■ For more information on these and the rest of Sam's work, please visit www.samtoft.co.uk

Mr Mustard puppet

