



INFLUENCES

"Howard Hodgkin, Albert Irvin and John Hoyland (*Chasing Memories*, pictured) are three artists who I have always admired, both with their handling of the mediums they use and their colour. The Abstract Expressionists were a great influence on me too, when I first became interested in working with colour and scale."



MATERIALS

Charlotte largely paints in acrylics and favours a few different makes. "I use Lascaux Acrylics for my heavy body colour and also Golden Acrylics," she says. "I use a range of Golden mediums that extend the paint too – they will be transparent when they are dry so I can manipulate the transparency or the opacity of the paint."



TECHNIQUES

Despite appearances, Charlotte avoids using fluorescent paint, preferring to rely on contrasting colour combinations. Much of her technique is adapted from screen printing: the paint is applied in layers, with colours overlapping to create a contrast in textures. "For all the additional marks, I don't have any contact with the surface, everything is poured or applied from above."

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TALKING TECHNIQUE *with* Charlotte Cornish

To begin our 10-page "Colour Special", Cambridge artist Charlotte Cornish tells Steve Pill how she has adapted printmaking techniques to make her striking abstract paintings

Everyone from art teachers, to interior designers and even fashion stylists will advise you not to be 'afraid' of colour, especially given Britain's general fondness for pencil drawings, Magnolia walls and beige knitwear. One artist who has wholeheartedly embraced the full scope of the colour palette is Charlotte Cornish, a Cambridge-based painter whose abstract pieces are a riot of lime greens, neon oranges and zinging cyans.

During a printmaking degree at Brighton University, Charlotte took inspiration from the arcades and the seafront, beginning to develop a series of large-scale, colourful pieces that were based on her surroundings. She would later study at the Slade and Central St. Martins, where she was influenced by both the expressive marks of American painters like Jackson Pollock and the bold colours of modern British artists including Howard Hodgkin and John Hoyland. "I really started to move away from describing real, seen places and started to describe more the feeling of a place. Even to this day, my work is still very much inspired by place and a sense of being in places, but now it is more to do with an emotional response to places rather than what you actually see."

Nowadays, she continues to travel to gather inspiration for her work, even if her finished paintings may not immediately appear grounded in the natural world. However, whether visiting Ireland, Venice or her regular autumn trip to the Lake District, Charlotte will avoid looking at the wider landscape and instead focus on the little details. "For the last few years, I have been working a lot with circles so I have looked for things that have circles in them," she explains. "A lot of my work has been inspired by the paraphernalia surrounding the fishing industry so [I've looked for] boats with buoys, different floats with nets, things like that. I'll take different close up photographs of areas of interest that have already become quite abstracted and then from those I will do very simple line drawn sketches that then move the imagery into

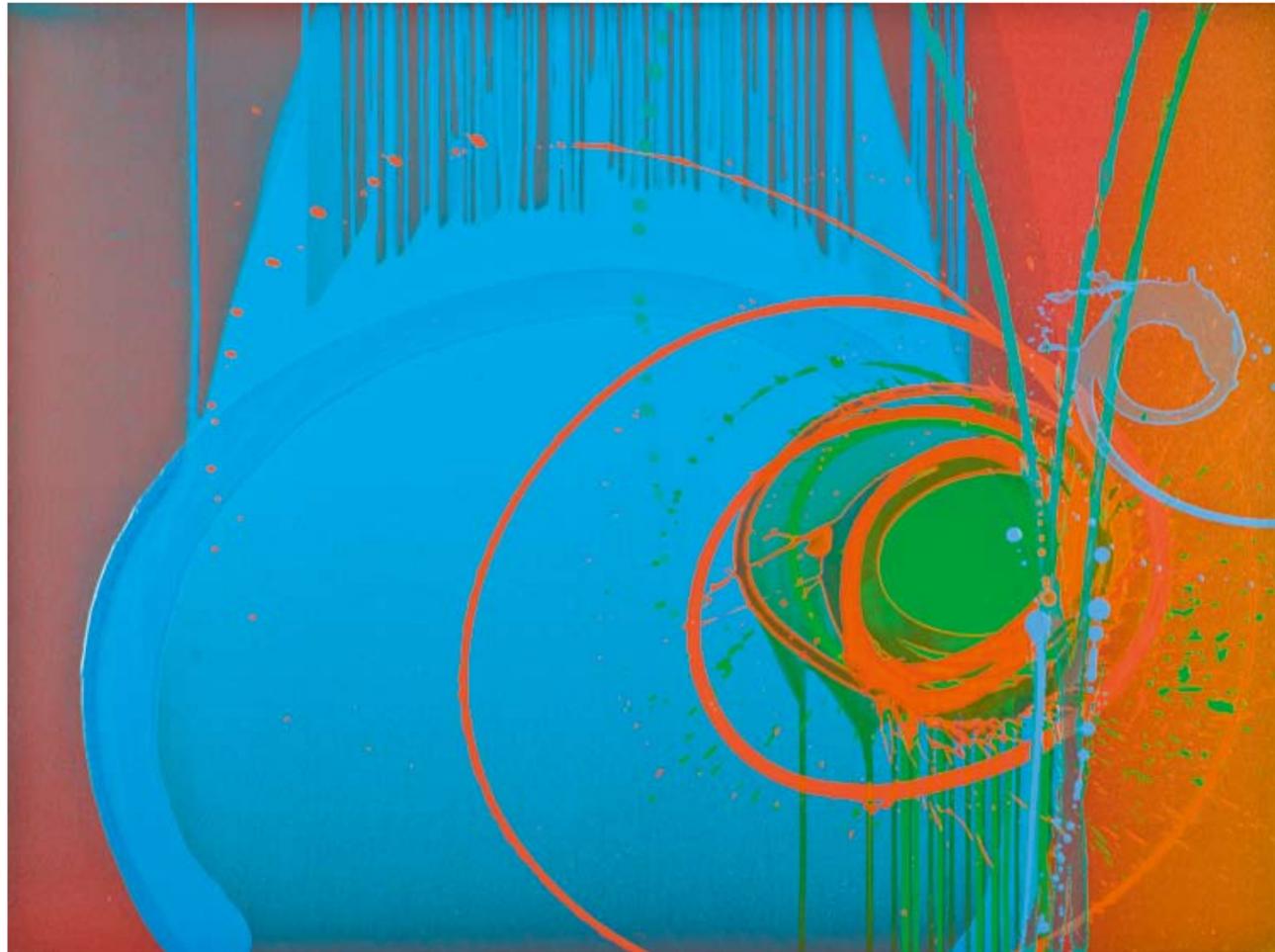
a more abstracted form, where I am looking at the composition purely in terms of circles and blocks of geometric form."

Charlotte also likes to paint small watercolour studies, either from life when she is out and about or from photographs back in the studio. Along with line drawings and photographs, these studies help abstract the composition further and allow her to draw on multiple references for her finished works. "I try to keep as much freedom as possible when I am working on >

BELOW *Venturing I*, lithograph and screenprint, 86x72cm

OPPOSITE PAGE Charlotte adds another layer of paint. Photo: Colin Curwood





ABOVE *Walking Life I*, acrylic on canvas, 90x120cm

the paintings so I am very rarely working to a strict study – I try to use them as a starting point and then let the painting go along in its own kind of way.”

For anyone who still thinks that abstract painting is an excuse for a canvas full of painted squiggles and blobs of colour, the lengthy and complex process that Charlotte goes through should definitely prove otherwise. Using found objects for inspiration gives her a constant supply of new shapes and combinations and she is a strong believer in the idea that abstract art needs a realistic base. “I’ve found that, although my work has become more symbolic and there is certainly a sense that the shapes and forms are trying to convey things that are not part of the seen world, I do think that using a concrete starting point gives you the ingredients to start making the recipe that becomes the paintings. I know that is a loose metaphor but if I don’t have the visual information to play with, I do find it difficult to start off with just a blank canvas.”

“My work is still very much inspired by place but now it is more to do with an emotional response rather than what you actually see”

Two of Charlotte’s most recent paintings, *Walking Life I* and *II*, were begun before a recent stay in the Lake District and really came together after her trip. As such, they are slightly more removed than her other paintings of the area, yet they still attempt to convey her experience of walking through the national park, as well as describing the experience of living life to the full and taking things as they come. “These were quite symbolic pieces but there were references in them to the intensity of colour that I find during autumn,” she says. “When you look at my work, you probably don’t see the colours that you see in nature but that is an influence. That intensity of light against form when out in nature does have an impact on me.”

Despite being made simultaneously and numbered as if in a series, the two *Walking Life* paintings are not designed to be shown alongside one another. “Often if I am working on commissioned work, I will work on a pair so they have a choice – the work has been made with that in mind. I worked on them as a pair and the client chose *Walking Life II* which has gone off for a wedding present for the nephew of the client.”

For her final paintings, Charlotte starts by applying a gesso primer and several layers of paint to saturate the canvas in colour. “I don’t want any brushstrokes to be showing so I try to get it as uniform as possible,”



she says. Once these layers have dried, the remaining paint is all poured, either directly from large containers for the larger colour fields or else applied in flicks and splashes with a range of utensils, from pipettes to brushes. Charlotte lays her canvases flat on the floor, working from above and avoiding making any contact with them at all.

Despite such an exuberant technique, Charlotte is very methodical in the way she approaches the work, painting just a single layer every day and allowing them to dry only if she likes the results. “It gives me the opportunity to remove marks that I don’t like because I’m always working wet paint onto dry paint. I have a bucket with a sponge next to me so that I can take off marks from the dry surface if they are not how I want them to be. I think one thing that is important to my work is that although there is a sense of the immediacy of the marks that I am making, they are very controlled so there is a sense that although the work looks like it was made very quickly, the actual contemplation and the making of the work does have a structured and controlled technique. I hope that is what lends the tension to the work.”

Aside from her painting, Charlotte often produces similarly bright prints that combine lithography and screen printing techniques. “Strangely enough, the

way I approach the technique in my painting was very much informed by how I make prints,” she says.

“Screenprinting became my favourite medium to work with and one of the things I liked about the process was that I could lay down flat areas of very strong colour very quickly and build up the images in that very direct way.”

A print like *Venturing I* may look similar to her paintings, yet it was made by using three or four lithographic plates to get the rich colour of the background, before the extra marks were made by silkscreen printing. Viewed up close, the difference in texture of these different print styles helps to accentuate the contrasting colours. “I suppose ‘tension’ is a difficult word to use but I want to create some tension between flat, more saturated colour fields and then the very direct, gestural marks on top, and that language is both in my prints and my paintings.” www.charlottecornish.co.uk



TOP *Walking Life II*, acrylic on canvas, 90x120cm
INSET Charlotte in her studio.
Photo: Colin Curwood