



ART

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

For many the Tamar Valley marks the spot where Devon ends and Cornwall begins – but for its many artists it is a rich source of inspiration and the subject of a new London exhibition, writes LAURA JOINT

The River Tamar. A dividing line, separating Devon and Cornwall? Traditionally, yes. But not for the artists who form the Drawn to the Valley collective. For them, the River Tamar is the natural artery that brings them together.

The group was set up in 2003, since then it has grown to 160

ABOVE: Clark Nichol *Summer Shower at Sandymouth* (acrylic on canvas)

members, artists across the spectrum, all living and working in the Tamar Valley. Now, for the first time, they are holding their first exhibition in London.

Drawn to London at the Royal Opera Arcade Gallery in Pall Mall takes place on 21-27 October, and 36 of the group's artists are taking part. It's unusual for so many artists from such a large

geographical area to take an exhibition to the capital, and it's something the collective have wanted to do for some time.

One of the artists exhibiting is vice-chair of Drawn to the Valley, Sally O'Neill. "This is an important showcase for our artists, an opportunity to reach a much wider audience," she says. "There are a lot of people



Sally O'Neill: "One of the strengths is the diversity of the work."



Clark Nicol works in acrylics to capture Devon's seascapes

in London who know Devon and Cornwall but probably don't see so much of the art that is made there. So we thought 'let's go and show them'.

"One of the strengths of Drawn to the Valley is the diversity of work and the exhibition will reflect this," she added. "It's wonderful to see how people have risen to the challenge,

producing new work specially for London. And some have taken the opportunity to work to a larger scale."

Sally is one of them. Her studio is a converted cowshed at her home in Coryton. To get here from Tavistock, you drive past Brentor, down hedge-lined country lanes and past fields of sheep. These are the scenes

Sally often finds herself painting: "I love it here in winter when you can see the trees in their skeletal forms. That must be my architectural background, looking at the form and structure of everything.

"In winter, you can see the history in the hedgerows and the range of colours and textures of the moor." ▶

Sally usually works in acrylics, but for the London exhibition, she is also returning to pen and ink drawing. "The black and white brings out the sheer drama of the Dartmoor landscape," she says.

Two other artists showing their work in London are husband and wife Clark and Karen Nicol, who live a few miles up the road, in Lydford. They work in totally different ways, Clark's main tool being acrylic paints and Karen's a sewing machine.

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Much of Karen's work is commissioned, some internationally, while her imaginative exhibition pieces are highly sought after. Having only moved to textile art a few years ago, she now works exclusively on her embroideries to keep up with demand: "My idea was to combine my love of photography, drawing, sewing and beautiful fabrics," she explains.

"I love our whippets and, initially inspired by their graceful poses, I took photos and made sketches. Working on linen or sometimes vintage fabric, stretched in a hoop, I embroider freehand – my sewing machine is my pencil." She often uses appliqué in her work to create

ABOVE: Sally O'Neill *New Lamb's Near Brentor*

BELOW: Karen Nicol was inspired by the graceful poses of her whippets in this embroidered piece: *The Wind Hound*

character or humour. "In a way, my work falls between art and craft." While her work is finely crafted, it is certainly art.

Many of her subjects are animals – such as the guinea fowl at their smallholding, people's pets, wildlife or a horse. "I took a lot of photos to capture that expression in the eye which reflects the relationship you can have with a horse. That's why I called the embroidery *The Bond*."

But not all her models are animals. "I once asked a ballet dancer to model for me," she remembers. "She came here and I photographed her spinning around. When I sewed it, I left some of the threads loose, to give

a sense of movement."

While Karen works in her loft studio with expansive views towards Dartmoor, Clark is downstairs, working on his latest paintings based on the north Devon coastline. But these aren't your usual seascapes: "I like to experiment with lines, boxes and textures which draw people in, sometimes creating little compartments within the painting, with fresh areas of interest. The effect is to allow the viewer to engage in a journey around the painting."

In his new work for the London event, he has experimented further: "In one of the paintings, *Seaweed at Barricane*, I used an under paint of seaweed colour, painted the dark rocks over it and then removed that paint when it was still wet to reveal the paint underneath. I also used printing techniques with crumpled newspaper to create a rocky surface pattern. And then there are my usual splashes and splatterings."

Clark is a previous quarter finalist of Sky Arts' Landscape Painter of the Year competition and has exhibited in London. "As a group, Drawn to the Valley has always aspired to greater things, so the London exhibition is a good move at a good time," he says. "It's getting us out to a wider audience and that's really what we need." ♦

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