



# *The Painter's* PAINTER

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH



*Rising talent Max Leuchars is bringing  
the historic traditions of impasto and  
sgraffito to a new audience*

Sometimes an artist comes onto the scene with something new to say, with a new idea, a new approach or, in Max Leuchars' case, a historic approach renewed. Max is young and largely self-taught, and as such carries none of the allegiances to modes or rules of practice that other young painters might start out with. This is a good thing. The phrase 'self-taught' has become as respected in Fine Art as graduation from any top flight art school, provided the artist has talent, focus and creative intent.

When I was first invited to see Max's work, I experienced a few seconds of surprised disorientation. The warm palette and deep impasto surface of his work was so

'old school' that I had trouble, just for a moment, relating it to young talent and the strong collector interest I'd heard about. But then I got it. Max is a painter's painter, an artist with a visceral and unapologetic relationship with paint. It makes face to face engagement with his work pretty thrilling. From Van Gogh to Lucian Freud, the inherent energy of impasto techniques have put power into artworks that would have been less vital, less emotionally provoking without them.



My guess right then was that Max had been raised around historical works of art. "My parents are antique dealers," he confirms, "so I grew up learning how to spot beautiful objects amongst things that may



ABOVE  
Clearing Clouds, Daymer Bay



not look particularly special or important. I would join in on trips to flea and antique markets, and we would drive home with a car load of vintage furniture and French Impressionist style oil paintings.” Max was born in Winchester and studied at Bryanston school, whose alumni include artists Lucian Freud, Sir Howard Hodgkin and designer Sir Terence Conran. The art education he received there was among the best in the country thanks to the school’s exceptional studio facilities, tutors and visiting speakers.

“I don’t think I would be painting today if I hadn’t been exposed to the work of certain artists there,” he says, “especially 20th century Italian painter and sculptor Giacometti, from whom I’ve gained a lot of inspiration.” After Bryanston, Max decided not to pursue further education, and he did not attend art school. “I already knew I wanted to be an artist, so I began to paint straight out of school alongside paying jobs like bar work and landscaping” he says, of a strategy that countless young artists must take. Now, aged 26, he has been painting full time for two years and is represented by several leading UK art galleries “which is an absolute dream,” says Max, “I feel very lucky.” It’s never luck in the arts though.

Contrary to the idyllic myth of life as an artist, breaking into the art scene is mostly down to hard work and unwavering determination. “I always loved painting and drawing so becoming an artist was never in doubt,” Max tells me. “Although the art world can be challenging, I think

it’s important to not play to the market or succumb to doing what you think is expected of you. I never want to lose the reason I started painting in the first place. I work hard in my studio, and I seem to be getting by month to month, and you can’t put a price on the freedom of enjoying your working life.”

The physical act of painting seems to be what Max loves most, and the things that inspire him are many and varied. “Lots of different places inspire my landscape works,” he says. “I love painting in Cornwall, especially seascapes, and the rolling hills around Winchester where I grew up have a nostalgic draw for me, so I often go back to paint them. I also travel a great deal for inspiration, and I’ve recently enjoyed painting in Morocco, which has involved a whole new palette. I constantly need new places to inspire me, or the act of painting can begin to feel like a process. That’s also why I’ve started to paint interior scenes. The fluidity and movement which I try to create in my land and seascapes seem to translate beautifully into urban subjects like bustling bar scenes. Interiors are becoming more important to me now that I have a studio in London and have spent the past few years experiencing city life. I think it makes sense as an artist to reflect your daily environment in your work - it feels like a natural progression for me, and exploring new subjects helps you evolve as a painter – you can experiment with new angles and techniques and learn things which then feed back into your original subjects.”



In his studio Max always begins with a drawing from life or from his own photographs, but the scenes he paints can be partly invented. His colour choices, though, are more instinctive, and the way he applies paint, by way of emphatic palette knife work, comes directly from the traditions of impasto oil work and sgraffito mark making. “I work with very thick oils, which allows paint to mix on the canvas,” says Max. “I choose contrasting colours and then put them onto one palette knife, all together, and work them across and

into the surface of the canvas.” In this way, colours mix incidentally together as the palette knife is drawn across the work, resulting in subtle adjustments of tone which capture the textures, form or topography of his subject. “I never know exactly how things will turn out, and that is what makes this way of painting so exciting,” he says. “In a sense, this technique means that the artwork really does paint itself, I don’t need to be precious about it. It also suits my love of gestural painting on large scale canvases because it is such a free and



CREATE



TOP  
Livorno Sea View

ABOVE  
Salisbury Plain



energetic way to work, and then when you stand back from the surface you see it has all come together.”

This April, Max is exhibiting his most recent collection at Polzeath’s Whitewater Contemporary. It includes a series of dramatic seascapes inspired by the North Cornwall coast, alongside a collection of rural landscapes and city scenes from his European travels. The show, his third for Whitewater, draws an interesting line of progression for an artist who has exhibited both at the LAPADA event in Berkely

Square London, which brings together the worlds of fine art and antiques, and at leading contemporary art galleries, all within just a few years. “I’m not sure where my work sits in the wider art scene,” says Max, “but I don’t really think about it. I’m exactly where I want to be.”

*See Max Leuchars’ Solo Exhibition from 12th April to 7th May at Whitewater Contemporary, The Parade, Polzeath, PL27 6SR, and at [whitewatercontemporary.co.uk](http://whitewatercontemporary.co.uk)*

 [maxleuchars.com](http://maxleuchars.com)

ABOVE  
Lulworth Cove Beach