



# Cool, Calm and Collected

Helen Chislett explores the impressionistic art of Jessica Zoob

**I**n Jessica Zoob's studio autumnal sunshine is pouring through huge windows looking out to the rolling Sussex Downs. This corner of East Sussex has a special quality of airy light that has fascinated artists for centuries. Look at Zoob's paintings - the 'dreamscapes' that have fascinated her for the last couple of years - and you can see how it has informed and inspired so much of her own poetic and impressionistic work.

My own relationship with Zoob is typical of how people react when they first discover her. It began with a purely professional assignment - a feature for the Sunday Times - followed by an aching desire to own one of her paintings. The one I chose was completely impractical - a three-metre wide canvas for which I did not have a wall big enough. But I was already planning to move house and, yes, that one came with the most perfect place to hang such a painting. It took nine long months to get from house A to house B, but Zoob never doubted that Just An April Day and I would eventually live together. As she says, "I think my paintings choose the person they want to live with, just as much as that person chooses them."

This summer, when I was given the chance to curate a show, Midsummer Dream at the ROVE

gallery in Hoxton Square, I was determined Zoob would be a part of it. It was her first opportunity to show what she can achieve when working on a very big scale. One of the most enduring images of the event was her monumental centrepiece Endless Love - a work which totals ten separate canvases over an area 10.8m by 2m, the joyous result of many hundreds of hours of hard graft.

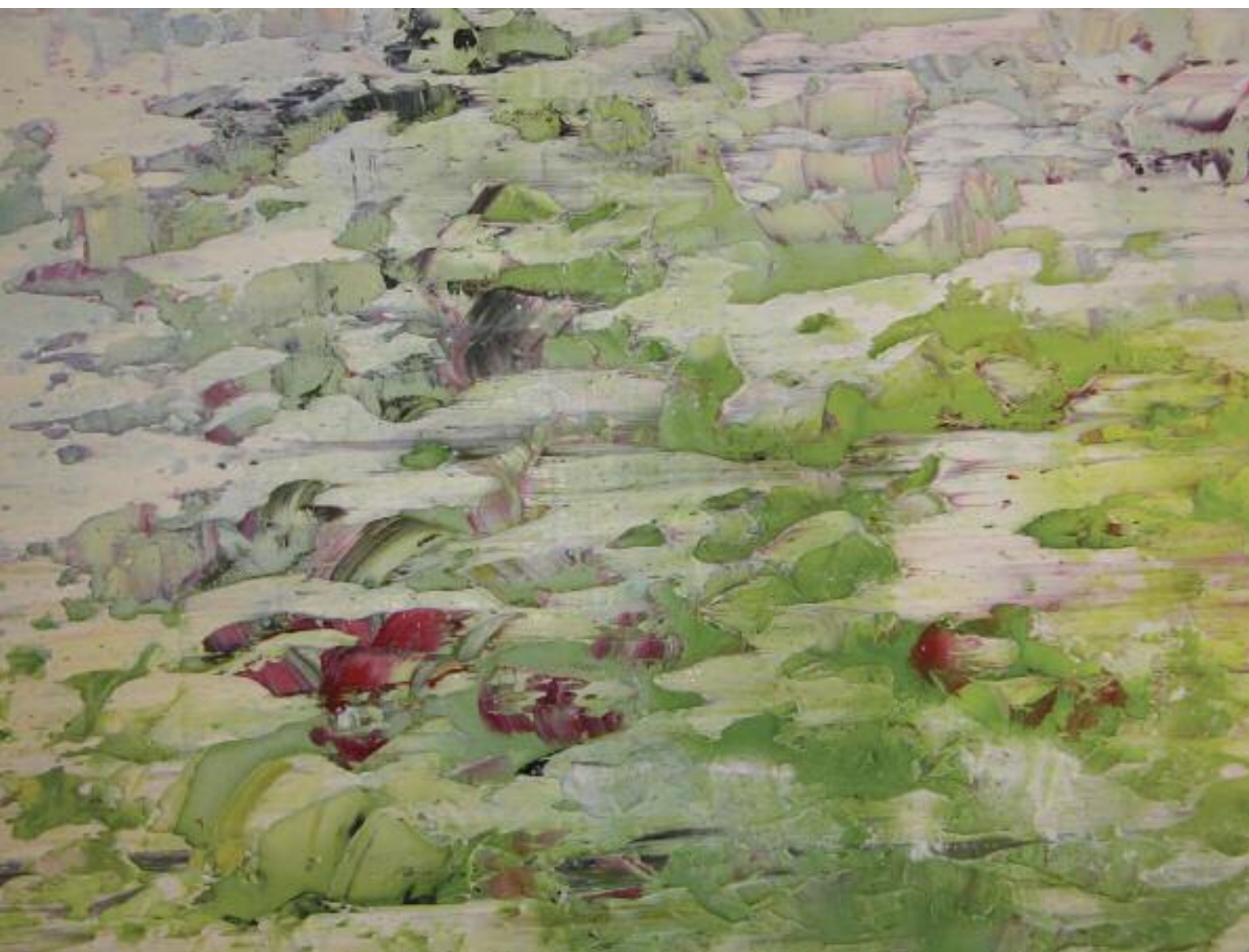
'Archaeological' is the word that most springs to mind when watching Zoob at work. First she builds up layers and layers of oils which are then partly obliterated by continuous rubbing back, scraping or cutting into the surface. She is fascinated by texture, distressed surfaces and graffitied walls - the history these reveal. Her process treads a fine line between being in control of the materials and allowing the unexpected to happen. As she explains, "If everything was a drawing that you simply filled in with colour, you would not allow the paint to bring its own energy to a work. You can work in a contrived way to create a complete beautiful and perfect painting - that is stage one - but then you have to have the bravery to destroy it in part and push through to the next stage." Some works take months or years to create, others a few weeks. But the final stage is always just an

instant - the application of the colour glaze - something that often transforms the finished painting. That is where the sense of light comes from - as if a veil has been drawn across the canvas. No wonder that ROVE owner Kenny Schachter describes her as "Monet meets Gerhard Richter".

The yang side to her more usually yin approach is when she uses pure pigments of mainly acrylic colour, often embellished with coloured glass, to produce canvases bursting with excitement and energy. She loves the thrill and the instant gratification of working with just colour, the fact that she is forced to work at lightning speed because it is so liquid: "Every now and again I want to go wild and crazy, then I might pull right back and do something that is almost white on white." However, do not make the mistake of thinking

Zoob's work is abstract: "My intention is that my paintings are impressionistic, if anything, because they are nearly always about landscapes both real and emotional. To me abstract implies that the viewer is not going to understand the work and is not expected to - it is alienating in the same way that calling something Untitled is. Those labels shut people out while I am always trying to draw people in. What is exciting to me is that people who love my work bring something of themselves to the creative process, because it is how they engage with their own imagination when they look into a painting that then completes the work."

'Healing', 'tranquil' and 'joyous' are words commonly used around Zoob's work. It is not that they are unfailingly glad in a Pollyanna-ish way though - there are storms in evidence,



metaphors for the turbulence of life. However, there is optimism too - light on the edge of a cloud or a shaft of light breaking through the darkness. Subliminally, they are all about moving to a state of lightness or place of hope. The emotion she puts into her paintings is often equalled by the emotion they elicit in other people, as her visitors' book would testify: comments such as 'I can breathe when I look at this' or 'There is space for me to dream' are typical. From my own experience I would say that her work has the uncanny ability to hold up a mirror to one's own emotional state - an insightful and spiritual moment of contemplation that forms a real connection between viewer and painting.

Art collector Julia Trappe - wife of opera tenor Juan Diego Florez - felt similarly moved by Zoob's

work the moment she walked into the ROVE gallery: "...When I first saw the work of Jessica Zoob I was very touched. She communicates the complex layers of femininity with a sense of beauty, sensibility and tenderness."

It is now ten years since Zoob (previously Jessica Tyrwhitt) took up painting full-time. Having taken her Foundation course at the Central School of Art in London, she then studied Theatre Design at Nottingham. Within a week of graduating, she was snapped up by a top agent and found herself designing *Cosi Fan Tutte* in Bermuda. When she left the theatre after seven non-stop years - the catalyst being the birth of her first daughter Ana, now fourteen - it was "like cutting off my arm, real physical pain". Forays into fashion, interior and corporate design were financially successful, but none of them ignited the same passion that

the theatre once had. On the eve of the millennium, she announced to her husband, David, himself a theatre director, that she was jacking it all in for a new career as an artist: "He was horrified because we had just bought a wreck of a house and had two children (their second daughter Kat is now ten) and we really needed my salary too, but I just had to do it. It was complete and utter self-indulgence, but I was so inspired by the joy and freedom of seeing my own small children paint that I wanted the same for me. Now I know this is what I was put on the planet to do."

Midsummer Dream aside, this has been a big year for her: two highly successful shows, *Desire*, showcased during London Design Week, and *Escape* at the newly opened Studio 226 in Chelsea Harbour's Design Centre, and an invitation to show in Houston, Texas, courtesy of one of her most influential and enthusiastic private collectors. The sheer physical exhaustion of producing three major collections in a single year is not something she plans to repeat - "I think it almost killed me" - but her passion for what she does is undimmed: "I find the process of painting so fascinating and pleasurable that there are always new journeys I want to explore.



well: "I speak the language and now that I have such a great studio space, I am able to work on a grand scale when needed. The work I do for my own collections is all about following my own heart, but I am also excited by the idea of collaborating on special projects."

This year has also seen her first collaboration with sculptor and woodsman, Karl Smith ([www.carvedoak.co.uk](http://www.carvedoak.co.uk)) - between them they have created the *Wishing Tree*: a mature oak that has been split lengthways and then carved by Smith with messages and motifs of love, which in turn have been painted by Zoob. The tree has now been spliced back together with steel bands, but with strategic holes carved into the bark which allow viewers glimpses of this secret and magical world. Since it was unveiled in June at *Midsummer Dream*, the tree has been tied with hundreds of individual threads - each one symbolising somebody's wish - a totem of optimism.

Although there is no doubt her star is in the ascendant, with prices trebling over the last few years, Zoob knows her own fans buy for love rather than investment: "I paint for the joy of it and each painting speaks of a particular journey in my own life. There is only ever one painting in the world that tells that story and people fall in love with the paintings that connect most eloquently to them. I always say to people, if you are not completely in love with a piece, don't buy it - because someone else will."

I can walk out of my house and see a puddle or a leaf or an old wall and that will be enough to captivate me and start me thinking about its beauty. I can't imagine ever sitting in front of a blank canvas and not knowing what to do."

Her work is now in collections worldwide, with prices ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands, depending on scale and process. She plans to work at a slightly more leisurely pace next year, concentrating on one major collection and a number of individual commissions. Her recent presence at Chelsea Harbour has brought her to the attention of leading interior designers, and she hopes will lead to further commissions both domestic and corporate. As she says, her previous professions mean that she understands the constraints and demands of interior design

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*Escape by Jessica Zoob runs until 7 January at Studio 226, Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, London, SW10 0XE. Telephone: +44 (0) 20 7351 6275.*

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