



If Cézanne visited Ireland: Josephine Trotter's favourite tipple in *Interior with Guinness*

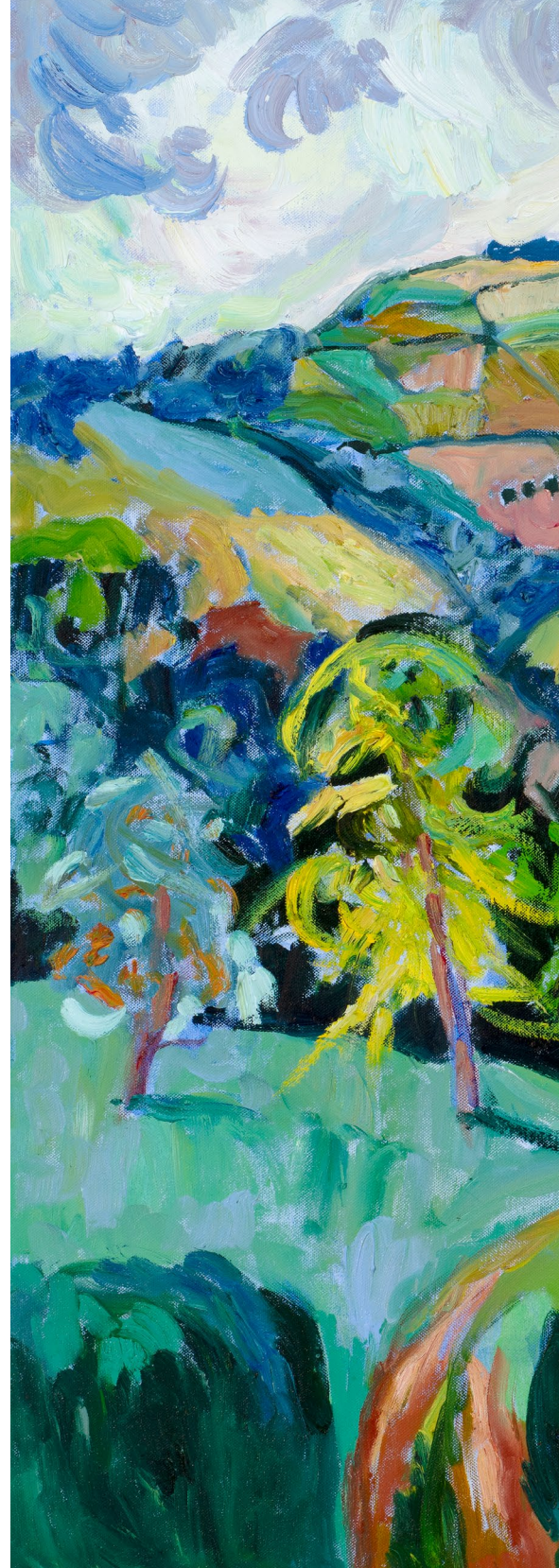
Somewhere over the rainbow

After more than six decades of braving storms, tractors and inquisitive cows for her art, fortified by the odd Guinness, Josephine Trotter still finds joy in painting pictures that sing with colour, says **Carla Passino**

LANDSCAPES are like large nudes,' says Josephine Trotter, as her arm sweeps across the barn she converted into her studio near Banbury, Oxfordshire. A drawing of a naked model, propped against golden stones under dozens of views, of the Cotswolds and Wensleydale, the Usk Valley and the Quantocks, proves her point: fields echo the turn of a thigh, rivers

follow the curve of a back and a lake is the crook of an elbow. Where there are straight lines—a gate, perhaps—they are there to frame the undulating countryside beyond.

Unlike nudes, however, her landscapes sing with colour. 'I love paint,' she sighs (her mixing palette, thickly encrusted in eddies of blue and green with the odd pop of red, white and yellow for contrast, is almost a work



of art in its own right). In her early days, Ms Trotter trained with painter and Slade teacher Maurice Feild, who would only allow her to use five colours: 'When I got to Chelsea Art School, I went out one day and bought six different tubes of green. I kept thinking, Maurice Feild is done—because [with him] we had to make our own greens.' However, she confesses, the vibrant kaleidoscope of her pictures is not a deliberate choice, nor a belated rebellion against a strict teacher: 'I paint exactly what I see.' She is convinced 'all that colour seeped into [her] soul' when



The curves of landscape—rolling hills, climbing walls, waving branches—captivate the artist, as in *The Cotswolds*, featuring Brailes Hill

she was a small child in Peshawar, now Pakistan, and that's why she paints as she does. 'I actually think people have different "eyes",' she says and, to argue her point, she produces a portrait of her late mother-in-law, a distinguished, bespectacled old lady, whose hair was more salt than pepper: 'My father-in-law, a lovely man, said: "Josephine, I like your painting, but I've got one comment to make: [my wife]'s got brown hair." She must have been white for 30 years by then.'

Ms Trotter came back to Britain when she was 4½ years old, about six months after she had begun showing a real interest in drawing and painting, which her mother encouraged even if her art was 'always wild' and other people praised her elder sister's neater works. Yet she has remained attached to South Asia and went to India last Christmas, chronicling her trip in watercolour. She favours oils, however, so the majority of her paintings these days are of British landscapes: 'It's a physical

thing: if I was 30 years younger, I'd pack all my oils into a big suitcase and take them to India, whereas I can't do that now. I have painted a huge amount in France and Italy and Spain—I'd take my big old Volvo with a rack and come back with 17 canvases slotted in.'

Of the British countryside, she especially loves capturing the expanses of North Yorkshire—which has 'all these walls and they're mad, they literally fall down and go up and up again'—and Cumbria ('because [the light] →

dances across the hills and changes all the time: you get these dark depths and I love these little farmsteads and the old barns that pop up'). Yet, perhaps her favourite place is a perfect buttock of a hill near her house: 'Brailes Hill is my Mont Sainte-Victoire,' she says, referencing Cézanne's favourite view.

Although Ms Trotter's clouds—at times dark and roiling, at others white and peaceful, but always swirling—are reminiscent of van Gogh's, she names Cézanne as her 'total maestro'. She was still in her late teens, attending St Albans Art School in Hertfordshire, when her class was taken to the British Museum: 'They pulled out Cézanne's drawings and we drew from them. I love his negative spaces and brushwork and the way he paints trees. I've learned more from Cézanne [than any other painter].'

'Fields echo the turn of a thigh, rivers follow the curve of a back, a lake is the crook of an elbow'

As the French artist did with Mont Sainte-Victoire, she has painted Brailes Hill '1,000 times, in different lights and when I've been away or abroad, it's [like] coming home: there it is, in all its glory. It's so distinctive that, in the Second World War, they put camouflage nets over the top of it, because the German bombers used to empty their bombs out there'.

Yet, although her preference is for the countryside in its many incarnations, she confesses that she 'fell in love' with Didcot



Above: **The road goes ever on and on in the beguiling *Blue Road Across Exmoor*.**
Facing page: **Swirls of colour: *Anemones***

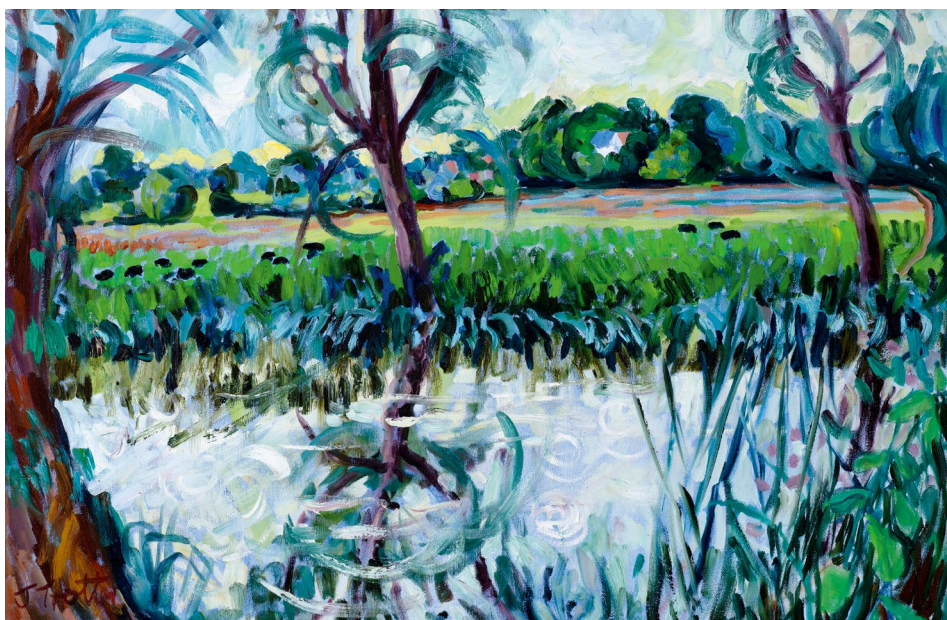


The flowers that walk: the artist embraces the way tulips move in the night, refusing to pin them still: 'I love flowers that flow'

Power Station, particularly the cooling towers, now demolished: 'I thought, "What would Paul Nash have done?" He painted the Wittenham Clumps and would have absolutely loved the cooling towers, because of the skittering light.' Her enthusiasm led her to hold a show featuring many Didcot Power Station oils—'and I didn't sell any,' she laughs. 'People weren't quite as in love with it as I was.'

A straw hat sits atop her easel's central post, a reminder that Ms Trotter paints her landscapes *en plein air*. Not that she seems to see the sun that often: wherever she looks in the three years' worth of work that fill her studio, she finds memories of cold days spent, brush in hand, under the pouring rain: 'That's St Catherine's Chapel and Chesil Beach; I have never been so wet in my life,' she says, gesturing towards a large canvas peppered with cows, before turning to a sheep-embroidered view of the Marlborough Downs: 'I was painting with a friend, and three times we had to put the canvas underneath [the hood of] her car and sit like this,' she says, mimicking chattering teeth. 'Oh and that one,' she waves her hand towards a picture crowded with ominous dark clouds (not black, because, reveals Ms Trotter, 'I never use the colour black, ever'). 'Now, I got seriously wet there. There was a storm and I had been dropped there.' With no means to go home and nowhere to take shelter, she kept painting until the water began playing havoc with her oils: 'It really got all a bit much. I'm surprised I haven't died of pneumonia.'

If even a storm can't stop her in her quest for a perfect picture, nothing else will—she has on occasion gone as far as lugging ➔



Constable's landscape takes on a new, vividly hued lease of life in *River Stour, Suffolk*



J. Trotter



In *Marlborough Downs*, the rain in which Ms Trotter frequently paints threatens to fall

a massive canvas, paints and two studio easels up a hill with a tractor—although, she admits, cows can sometimes become a little too inquisitive: ‘In some places, if the weather is not very good, I use the top of the car boot—I can get the easel underneath and manage like that, but if a great big cow comes around, they’re very nosy and they knock it off.’

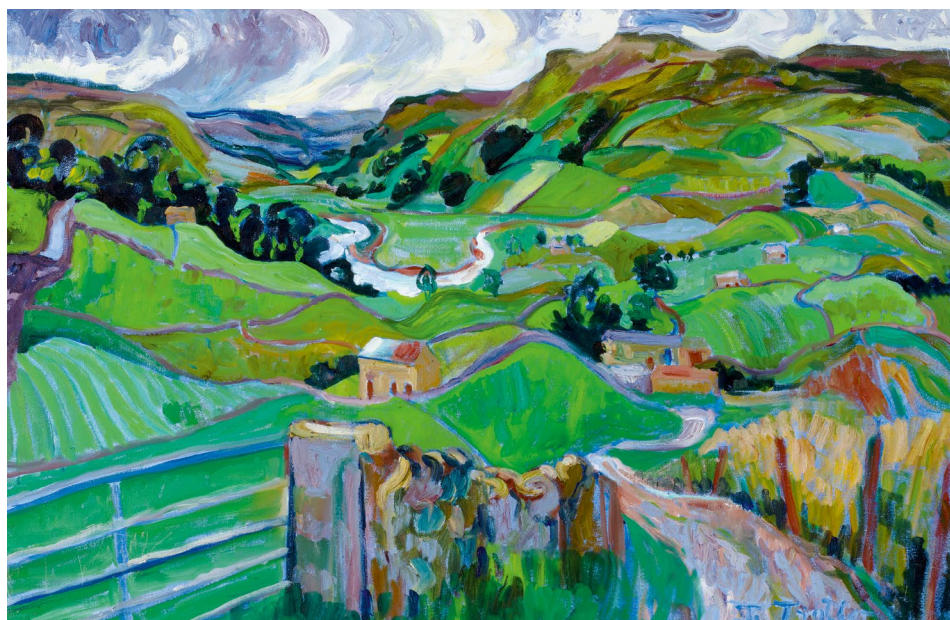
Despite the odd misadventure (the only one that stuck in her craw was an unpleasant farmer who took issue with where she had chosen to paint and was ‘really horrible’), there is an almost palpable relish in her voice when she talks about her work. ‘I have to say, when I’m painting, I’m really happy and the time goes so quickly. If I’m pushing a grandchild around the farm, I think, “Oh, it’s only seven minutes since I last looked at my watch”—but if I’m painting, it’s 2½ hours.’

Her joy shines from every canvas and, even when times are tough, she finds solace in art: ‘That’s *Turbulent Artichokes*,’ she says of a ripple of purple heads against a checked cloth. ‘I was having a really bad day for various personal reasons, really awful, and somebody said: “Go and do what you do best, go and paint.” I got a chap to cut my artichokes and put them in a bucket. I started at 9am and I think I finished at 9pm, but I was really in tears doing that painting. It’s expurgating: I find if I’m in a distressed state, I just go out and paint.’

Lest the mood sours, however, Ms Trotter—a firm believer in the glass half full: ‘I don’t hold with miserable painters’—is quick to point to another, ‘fun’ artichoke painting, the vegetables bursting out of a pot that looks remarkably like one that appears in some of Cézanne’s pictures. ‘I went to dinner with

friends and it was quite a grand dinner party. I walked in with this pot, and I said to the girl who was giving it: ‘Oh, Camilla, look, I’ve got Cézanne’s pot.’ “It’s not really, is it?” And I said: “Of course, it is.”

As are her landscapes, her still lifes are full of flowing curves and colours—often of flowers, especially tulips. ‘What I love about [them] is that they walk about in the night: [in the morning], you come in and they’re facing the opposite direction. A friend of mine told me: “Did you know if you put a pin through their neck, they’ll stay solid and straight?” And I said: “What a dreadful idea.” Because the whole thing about tulips is they flow and I love flowers that flow.’



The stone walls of North Yorkshire, as in *River Ure, Wensleydale*, are a beloved subject

Together with the blooms, peeking from some of her still lifes is a pint of Guinness—not least from an (otherwise very Cézanne-esque) interior with rhubarb, apples and wine. ‘I just love Guinness,’ she gushes, before revealing that it usually makes up her entire lunch. There’s no sign, on or off canvas, of another favourite tippie—a glass of whisky, which she occasionally has in the evening, perching it on a packed shelf where she has now wedged a cup of coffee. Yet two huge copper stills gleam pink and orange from a painting on the opposite wall: ‘I had to put in two figures, to get the sense of scale, otherwise people might think they were jelly bowls.’

‘For all her works look like bursts of colour, they are underpinned by rigorous drawing’

This is a picture that happened almost by accident. Ms Trotter was asked to star in a video for a local distillery: ‘They came and filmed me all day. It just took forever and at the last minute, they said: “Now, Josephine, you’ve got to try this whisky.” So I took a swig and said: “Oh, bloody hell.” It was so strong it made my eyes water. I fell off my chair. Cut—got to do it all over again. But I happened to be down there later and they said: “We’ve got these new copper stills.” I just thought the colour was fabulous. I particularly love the pink, which comes in through the orange.’

Whether it’s her landscapes, still lifes or portraits, her paintings always have ‘stuff going out’ of the frame: perhaps a daffodil, the billowing petals of an iris, a chunky stone



The art of solace: Ms Trotter painted *Turbulent Artichokes on a Checked Cloth* in a burst of cathartic activity on a difficult day

wall or the bottom of a gate. 'Composition is very easy for me and when I'm teaching, I say [to my pupils], turn your painting upside down: it should still look well balanced and satisfactory. I love teaching, because I love to drag out of people the joy of looking.'

Together, her colours, curves and composition make her paintings very distinctive and she takes great pride that people never fail to recognise a Trotter. She wants them to enjoy her work, 'because I'm 85—will I be here when I'm 95? I don't know, but my paintings will live on'. That said, she doesn't paint to please others: 'The first week that I was at Chelsea Art School, we had the same subject for a week and a different tutor every day. The first tutor came in and asked me: "Why have you put that [detail] in?" So I thought: "Oh, well, wrong. Scrape it out." The next day, a different tutor came around. He said: "Why haven't you put this in?" That was the moment I realised I had to be true to myself. I don't take any notice if [people] come along and say "that's rubbish". I just carry on. I'm strong in my own work.'

Even so, she doesn't rest on her laurels—she is ready to push her own boundaries: 'My mantra is, consistency is the stamp of mediocrity. I've got seven canvases waiting to be painted over. They'll not all be a success, nor should they be. I think that people who always look the same are very, very dull.'

For her, art is as much serious work as it is joy: for all they look like bursts of colour on canvas, her paintings are underpinned by rigorous drawing. 'There's a terrific lot of tension in landscape and that comes from years of drawing. I love paint and brush work, so I don't want it to look topographical, but, underneath, the drawing is there.' So much so that, even now, at the peak of a career spanning more than six decades, Ms Trotter still goes to a life-drawing studio nearly every Thursday (hence the nude sketch by one of the walls): 'I am a great believer that—like your scales on the piano—you need to draw and draw. If I haven't been for six weeks, I really notice I'm rusty.' In the past, she also used to get a model to come to her so she could sketch and paint from life. The model

was into racing, as was Ms Trotter's late husband, who, one day, didn't think twice about popping into the studio. 'He said, "So, Christine, who's going to win the—". I was abashed and said, "Darling, you're not meant to come in here when the model's posing nude", but they took absolutely no notice and went on talking about racing.'

There is no (human) nude among the pictures she is presenting at her forthcoming exhibition, 'Josephine Trotter: A New Dimension', but there are tender pendants of two of her granddaughters playing music, rhubarbs and tulips, and dozens of her 'landscape nudes', raging rivers, sinuous fields and her beloved Brailles Hill. She's excited about this latest body of work, but also, she admits, oddly detached: 'I feel my talent, which I know I've got, comes from out there, flows right through me and when I die, it will go on to somebody else. I feel I'm a vehicle for paint. That's what I feel: a channel.'  'Josephine Trotter: A New Dimension' is at Gallery 8, St James's, London SW1, May 1–13 (www.josephinetrotter.com)