

Jonathan Trim

Light and Water in East Anglia

That special light where the land meets the sea has fascinated artists for centuries. But as Jonathan Trim explains, capturing it has to be instinctive

WORDS Lynn Parr



THERE SOMETHING HUMBLING, yet thrilling, in standing at the edge of the land in the teeth of a salty gale. The sky goes on forever; the moving sea mesmerises. The hissing spray, the clatter of pebbles – how do you grasp all that and fix it into a painting that comes anywhere close to what you feel?

And what about the light that crackles and sparks, sheening the waves, turning the estuary mud to silver?

Jonathan Trim has studied that light for years, letting the Thames Estuary seep into his soul. And he believes the secret to reproducing its special atmosphere lies in letting the image form by itself.

“I’ve got no absolute preconceived idea of exactly what the painting is going to be like,” he says. “It’s kind of intuitive. I know roughly what I’m after, and work it out on the canvas. I use sketches to spark ideas, but I don’t take down an exact replica of a scene. As the painting develops, I’ll see opportunities to develop certain things. I can recall things quite vividly from just a simple pencil sketch – it triggers a memory very clearly.”

Layering transparent colour

Trim has refined his technique to an almost Pollock-like abstraction. Working on his tiny patio in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex – or in inclement weather his even tinier studio – Trim first hoses down his huge canvases with water. Then he lays them on the ground and flings and dribbles dilute acrylics over them, letting the colours merge and blend, waiting to see what appears.

“What I tend to do is texture up the canvas and let that dry, then work on top of it. I gradually build up the layers, letting colours fuse together, using traditional watercolour techniques. I use transparent washes, and

get a multitude of different colours working through the layers. I sometimes drag oil pastel across to pick up the high points. Some paintings are heavily textured with bits of shell and stone stuck on with PVA glue.”

The results zing with salt spray, glitter with light. Your head tells you you are looking at smudges and strokes, splashes of pure colour – yet you know if you reach out, you will touch wiry, windswept grass, sticky mud, cold water. You can almost smell the sea breeze.

Learning to look

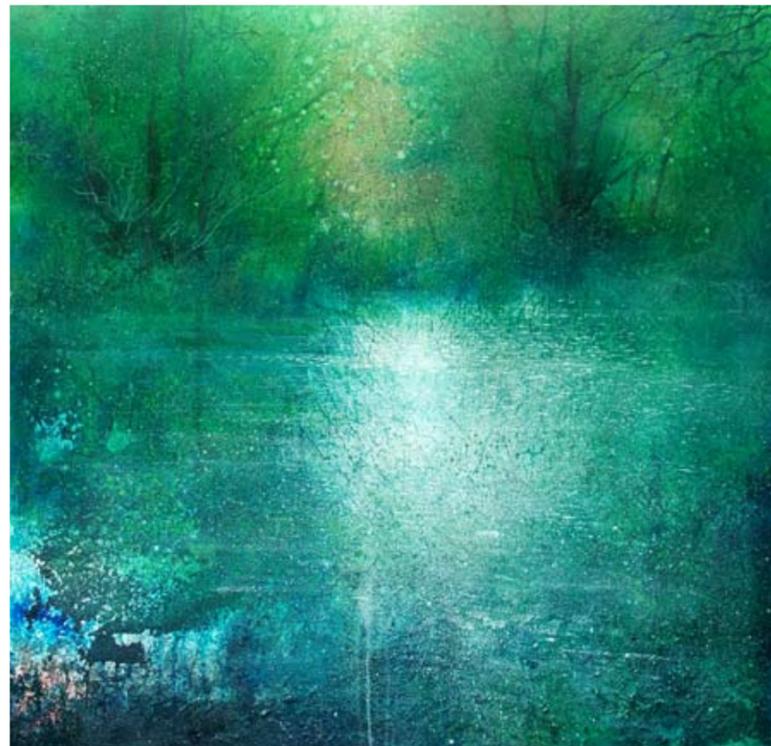
Trim developed his technique while teaching art in secondary schools, an experience he enjoyed immensely.

“One of the things that refreshed me about teaching was that students can give you ideas as much as you give them. I always used to take my work in and discuss how it was going with them. The question they always asked me was, ‘How much will that go for?’ The monetary value of art was always an interesting discussion point!

“The most important thing is teaching people to look. You can teach people things about colour mixing and shades, but in a way that’s immaterial, because you’re trying to get people to look in a different way – you want students to find their own particular way of expressing their ideas. You don’t want them producing a piece of work using someone else’s technique. What you want is people developing their own creative ideas and expressing them in a way that’s right for them.”

That is not to say artists can’t learn from the techniques of others, particularly the Old Masters.

“You can learn a lot as an artist by looking at other artists’ work. I remember as a 16-year-old being obsessed with Turner, and was always in the Tate looking at his work. And I spent a fair bit of time looking at ▶



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Constable’s work, too. You think of Constable as being reproduced on tins of biscuits, and I hate that, because when he was producing the work it was quite radical in comparison with those around him. Unless you know that you can’t fully understand the scope of the work.

“When you are looking at art it’s important to put it into the right context,” he continues. “You can understand a painting

see what you can actually do with it – how wet can you make it? Can you make it any wetter? Experimentation is really important.”

His own experimentation at present mainly involves changes in composition and scale, from canvases as large as his studio wall to smaller pieces on paper.

“I like working large-scale because gesturally you can get much bigger sweeps and strokes and marks, but I do enjoy suddenly changing to a smaller area. The small works under glass present different challenges and compositionally different problems – and different handling techniques. What I do like more than anything is a square format. There’s something about the balance within a square that I really enjoy. I don’t know what it is – whether it’s just a satisfying shape – but the idea of moving the horizon line up and down within that square I find fascinating. I play about with that a lot.” ▷

much better if you know why it was produced, the social conditions, the problems of that era.”



PAGE 12 Leigh from the Marsh, 30x30cm, £185

TOP LEFT Low Tide Looking Towards Leigh, 100x100cm, £700

TOP RIGHT Wet morning on the River Cherwell, Oxford, 900x 900cm, £500

ABOVE (& DETAIL) Elmet No 1, 100x100cm, £700

Playing with possibilities

One of the things he stressed as a teacher, and continues to believe now, is the importance of constant experimentation with materials and style.

“It’s absolutely vital that anyone trying to paint is involved in experimentation; to have materials and play with them and see what their possibilities are. I was very struck with Henry Moore and all the pebbles and stones he would collect, and just play with connecting them together, moving around and grouping them, because they gave him compositional ideas. That’s what every artist should be doing – they should be looking for opportunities, and develop and play with materials, because it’s only through that you can really understand what those materials can do for you. I could teach you to do a wash, but you need to play with the fluid colour and

Using acrylic washes

“People are quite surprised that my paintings are acrylic – you have to be quite careful with acrylics so they don’t appear chalky. One of the reasons my paintings work like they do is they’re quite diluted, like a wash. I haven’t got a favourite make of paint, though I tend to use Galleria simply because there’s a decent amount of paint in them. My technique is about going with very fluid colour and then just fusing that colour wet-in-wet, sometimes using much thicker paint.

“I like it drying quickly so I can get on with the layers. You have to be fairly quick at the start when you’re trying to pull it all together.”

TOP Golden Reflections on the River Cherwell, 50x50cm, £350

RIGHT Incoming Tide in the Thames Estuary, 100x100cm, £700





ABOVE *Rain Clearing*
Leigh Marsh, 30x30cm,
£185

RIGHT Trim's studio
BELOW *Rain Coming in*
Over the Estuary,

“It’s about life – how I think, how I feel – and that’s constantly evolving and changing, so therefore the work will always be changing”



One thing that links all Trim’s works is a sense of place. Many paintings are of wide open spaces along the East Anglian coast, with its saltmarshes and wild areas.

“The paintings I produce are of areas I know intimately. As a boy I used to knock about the Thames Estuary with my mates, and go on holiday to Suffolk and Norfolk. My paintings are of places where I’ve got a very strong link through experience and memory. For me, memory plays an important part in my work.”

And while his subjects resonate with personal meaning, his paintings have also struck a chord with people from Surrey to Holland, Lancaster to Canada. But though he has found a style that suits him and the mercurial moods of the estuary, he is still experimenting, still trying to capture that elusive light.

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Artist profile

Born in Essex, Jonathan Trim studied at Southend College of Art & Technology, Huddersfield Polytechnic and Leeds University. He worked as a secondary school art teacher while developing his own style, and left teaching to paint full time once his work began to sell well. Now specialising in landscapes of East Anglia, he has exhibited widely and his work is in collections worldwide. See www.jonathantrim.com. A selection of his paintings are at the Appleyard Gallery, Holt, Norfolk, for the rest of the year. Tel (01263) 712315 or see www.theappleyardgallery.com.