

# A restless calling for moor

The paintings of Clare DuVergier



Naomi Cudmore

“THERE AREN'T ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY OR THE ENERGY TO GO WITH THEM TO BE IN ALL OF THE PLACES AT THE TIMES THAT I WOULD LIKE. I WOULD BE MUCH BETTER AS A BIRD. MY EYES ARE LIKE SWIVELS WHEN I WALK AND I AM ALWAYS TRIPPING OVER! IN MY OLD AGE I WILL HAVE TO GET A PONY, STRAP ON MY PAINTING EQUIPMENT AND HEAD FOR THE HILLS.”

Clare DuVergier is one of the easiest artists I have ever had the pleasure of interviewing; she is frank, funny, talkative, modest and articulate. She is also, however, somewhat hard to pin down because she is an artist who seems to be constantly on the move in every sense. “I am my own worst enemy. I am hugely eclectic and often paint five or six pieces and then change direction and go off at a completely different tangent.”

Clare is a painter with a restless brush, for whom the moor offers an ever-changing challenge. She tracks down its detail and depth, if only to understand what she is reducing to essence, pursues its solitary emptiness which she can fill 'with her own imaginings' and craves its healing properties which provide a holistic stilling of the spirit as one passes through on foot.

Her work is sometimes stylised and captured from an aerial perspective and yet the depth remains striking as if all the walking and watching has been laid down in layers beneath the final canvas. “When I walk I am always looking for things such as the way that trees grow, how the undergrowth is constructed, what plants are in it. Part of me thinks that it is important for me to know this detail in order to be able to leave it out because then I know what shape it gives the whole.”

Clare lives in Wiveliscombe, which is within reach of both her stomping grounds of Exmoor and the Quantocks. Or at least she did when I met her on a blindingly cold night in December. But I am possibly out of date already because she's off again and wants to get even closer to nature; by spring Clare hopes to have moved to Exmoor itself, with the high hills and big skies to hand.

Snow is another inspiration for this hoped-for move, being a favourite subject of Clare's and one which she is repeatedly

frustrated about missing when she is not able to get up amongst it and paint. Her swift, unfussy style and ability to travel light – “I am a lady with a mackintosh square” – equip her well for sketching on site where she relishes the pressure of having to work quickly as she feels that this yields a fresher result.

“On site I have a watercolour palette with about 12 colours in it, three brushes (a number 12, a number 6 and a rigger) and water. I do draw but often I do this with a brush and don't really make a distinction between pencil and paint. I prefer to work from pans (usually Windsor and Newton) but if I am setting up to do a big landscape outside I might take tubes and I often pre-mix my colours as I like to work fast. I am a frightful bully when I teach and I am always shrieking at people – ‘none of this dib-dabbing!’ Mix enough colour so that you can do what you want and then get on with it!”

‘Getting on with it’ captures much of what Clare herself is all about really and goes some way to explaining her friendly, no-nonsense approach with others. Even her path into professional painting itself is a case in point, because although she has been painting – or thinking about painting – for most of her life, it is only since she reached her fifties that Clare decided to make her living this way. Not that she is a newcomer to the serious world of art. Clare had a painting exhibited at the Royal Academy as a very young child and even sat for the Polish Expressionist Henryk Gotlib at 16, but the detours since that time were to prove considerable and many decades passed before things came full circle.

It was 2000: Clare had recently moved to a smaller house after the recession spelt the end of a marriage and a business (“we went from riches to rags overnight and had to sell”) and to top it all (they say bad news comes in threes) she had been recently



Above: 'A Track Near Dunkery', oil (30 x 100cm), sold.

Page 66, main image: 'Across the Combes', oil (80cm x 80cm), £550 framed.

Page 66, bottom left and centre: Photos of Clare and her paints by Rupert Mardon, [www.rupertmardon.co.uk](http://www.rupertmardon.co.uk)

Page 66, bottom right: 'Natural Design', oil. “This is a very specific piece of landscape within Aisholt Common on the Quantocks. The contours create this zig-zag shape and if you look down on them from the side of the combe facing, it is difficult to work out which way the land slopes. Later in the day the shadows tell the story. From a distance the trees just become circles. This painting is available as a giclée print.”





'Last of the Light', oil. This was one of a number of pictures which Clare painted after a short walk in the Quantocks with a group of artists, who are all members of Somerset Art Works. The walk took place in the autumn of 2007 and was followed by an exhibition at Crowcombe Church House the following May. The group walked from Dead Woman's Ditch out towards Dowsborough Hill Fort. The painting is executed from memory.

Below left: 'Exmoor Gate', oil (90cm x 90cm), £780 unframed.

Below second from left: 'Winter Afternoon', oil (60 x 60cm), sold. "This is my favourite time of day on the Quantocks. The Great Wood is behind me and I am looking out over Aisholt."

Below third from left: 'Dunkery', watercolour (35 x 46cm), £200 unframed.

Below right: 'Footpath between Withypool & Tarr Steps', watercolour (35 x 50cm), £245 unframed.

Smaller watercolours are available unframed from about £125, oils from about £200 unframed.



diagnosed with fibromyalgia which left her sporadically exhausted and in pain. In customary style she 'got on with it'.

Clare started running art classes from home and she also visited the Hebrides, a 'huge inspiration' which catapulted her back into painting. "Being fairly unemployable, I had to become self employed and I decided that I would paint for a living.

"I loved the teaching and still do when I run the occasional class. I think there is something very exciting about being able to shortcut a person's journey because you have skills that they haven't yet discovered. Such simple things can make a difference – in watercolour people often never learn what their brushes can do and assume that a brush is a brush and that they all make the same mark. You can give them a whole new vocabulary with one simple lesson. I do not want to teach people to paint like me – I just want to open doors so that they can explore their own possibilities."

It is hardly surprising that, strident as Clare might be about aiming for a no-fuss approach, she likes to leave people to their own journey, because this is something which she is fiercely protective of in her own work, as well as in her personal interaction with the landscape. "I do not like sharing the view with other people and admit that this a dreadful thing to say! It's the emptiness which I seek and this is why I love moorland.

"I am also a somewhat selfish painter. I have always painted for me. I think I knew early on that I would find it very hard to steer my painting towards what other people wanted and that might be something I still struggle with now. I paint to please myself and this is the bottom line. I paint what I want to paint in the way that I want to paint it."

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So where does this leave the customer? Well, it depends on your point of view. Ask Clare to paint you a well-known beauty spot and she'll grimace ("painting beauty spots fills me with horror"). But if you like her work and you feel brave enough for an open commission such as 'paint how the hills feel in late June', you'll be greeted with an excited smile. For Clare it is all about capturing the essence and the character of the places that she visits, from a particular path on Exmoor ("paths, tracks and gateways appear in nearly all my paintings") or the way that the bracken changes over the seasons.

"My favourite place on Exmoor? I think Dicky's Path is my choice if I'm only allowed one last picnic. But I also love the

point where you walk from Bossington up the headland and come down through Lynch Combe. At that point you have moorland, woodland, coast – everything in one.

"Once I move up to Exmoor; though, I will still paint the Quantocks. I find myself smiling when I am there because it is so beautiful. It is an extraordinary landscape. I love the colours, especially as we come into autumn; when the brightness of the heather has faded and turns to that terracotta shade and the hedgerow beeches become luminous in the low light – a strange mixture of red, orange, sepia and Indian red and the grasses are like parchment."

Clare's work has been shown at a number of galleries in the South West, in Plymouth, Dartmouth and Porlock and also, on occasions, in Scotland in Aberfeldy and at the Byre Theatre in St Andrews. She currently exhibits as part of Somerset Art Weeks and the 10 Parishes Festival. She can be contacted via [info@clareduvergier.com](mailto:info@clareduvergier.com) and [www.clareduvergier.com](http://www.clareduvergier.com) – her website – tells more of her story. A small number of her images are scanned and can be produced as giclée prints. These can be ordered in sizes to suit and would be priced accordingly starting at around £45. These are printed at Courtyard Framing in Minehead [www.courtyardframing.co.uk](http://www.courtyardframing.co.uk)

Below left: 'Through the Trees', oil. A stylised and colourful painting of the Quantock combes in the winter. "Colour has become more important as I have got older and I often wonder if ultimately colour is sufficient on its own. Part of me thinks that the journey will end up at pure abstraction. That said, I do not see myself getting there for perhaps another ten years because there are so many things that I would find difficult to leave behind, things that give me enormous pleasure like light and shadow and characteristic features in landscapes – raised banks on Exmoor, the shape of paths on the Quantocks, the way they turn up at the edges and the pattern of the grasses."

Below right: 'Winter Shapes', mixed media (20 x 30cm), sold. "I often work up on the Quantocks in the late afternoon, starting off sitting comfortably but once the sun disappears the chill can be enormous within minutes and I need to beat a hasty retreat to the car park! This is also an easy place to get lost. Although it is small it can be hard to navigate. If you walk down into the combes and do not pay attention, when you come back up again it is easy to find yourself walking in completely the opposite direction to the one you think you have taken. You have to watch out!"

