

PEOPLE *artist**Artists in their studio*

SOPHIE BARBER

At her Hastings workspace, FIONA MCKENZIE JOHNSTON and photographer JOSHUA MONAGHAN find the painter taking everything in her shoe-covered stride, as she turns apparent failures into new work

As we enter her studio, located on a Hastings industrial estate conveniently close to her house, Sophie Barber hands us plastic shoe covers. Her dog Woosle – who she bought for herself as a reward for selling out an entire booth at the Paris edition of Art Basel in 2022 – is padding across the paintings that are lying face-up on the floor. Sophie, while warning us that ‘everywhere is the palette’, urges us to follow suit. It feels sacrilegious, but ‘they didn’t work’, she explains. ‘I’ll reuse them, and I like them heavy with compacted paint. They hang better.’

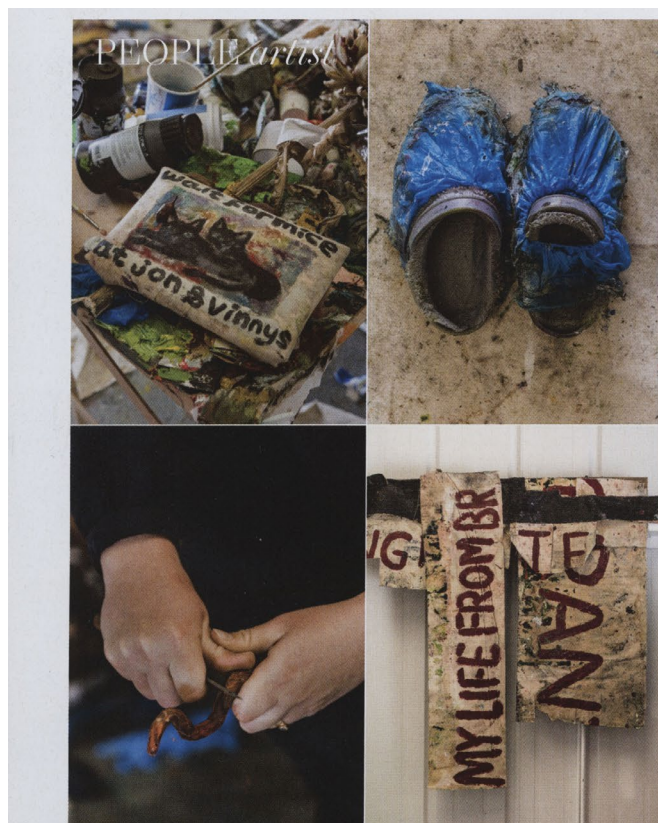
She gestures, as an example, at a vast depiction of Justin and Hailey Bieber on the wall that declares, via subtitle-like text, ‘JUSTIN LOVES GARDENERS WORLD’. Other times, failed canvases get cut up, stretched over a frame and then padded until they resemble cushion-like sculptural objects

that she describes as ‘friendly’ – and recounts how she once turned some into fridge magnets. Her references are varied and joyfully irreverent: Justin and Hailey have been copied from a *Vogue* cover shot by Annie Leibovitz. ‘I doubt Justin actually knows who Monty Don is,’ says Sophie. Similarly, it is unlikely that Kendrick Lamar has been to Camber Sands, or that the late American-Swedish sculptor Claes Oldenburg ever went to Pett Level – both beaches within 10 miles of her studio. Accounting for their presence in her work, she says, ‘I like creating an alternative narrative, and bringing these untouchable people – singers, celebrities, artists I admire – into my world.’

That world is this East Sussex town. ‘I love it,’ she says. And unusually for these London-centric times, she has never felt compelled to move elsewhere. She was brought up here, in a family ‘that is not the type to have art on the walls’, and ▷

TOP Sophie with her labradoodle Woosle in her spacious Hastings studio. She is standing in front of a work in progress and on the wall behind her (just seen on the right) is her 2021 oil on canvas *Justin loves gardeners world and monty don*

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studied at the Hastings campus of East Sussex College. Her break came when Sarah McCrory, director of Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, saw Sophie's work in the adjacent town of Bexhill-on-Sea at an exhibition by Flatland Projects, an organisation co-founded and run by Sophie's now husband, Ben Urban. Since then, with the support of Sophie's gallery, Alison Jacques, her paintings have been exhibited across the globe.

At the time of our visit, Sophie is preparing for her first solo institutional show, appropriately being staged at Hastings Contemporary. Noting that there can be a pressure to create a body of work – and relating that she is developing a series of sunflowers, layering her own story over art-history greats – she points out that her preference for pre-used canvas depends on her making mistakes. She also explains that she needs a steady stream of shoe coverings to stuff her painting-sculptures. As we hand ours back, it is very gladdening to think that they, too, are becoming part of Sophie's world □ Sophie Barber's solo show 'Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry' is at Hastings Contemporary on September 27-March 15, 2026: hastingscontemporary.org alisonjacques.com

GRID FROM TOP LEFT Sophie's 2024 oil on canvas and wood *Wait for mice at jon & vinnys*. The shoes she wears when painting are shrouded in blue plastic covers. Canvas off-cuts ready to be reused. Sophie carving a piece of wood. **BELOW** Looking at *Justin loves gardeners world and monty don*, which was inspired by a *Vogue* cover

