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## Sophie Barber - The Art of Staying Put

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Words by Jon Everall  
Photos by Steve Painter

This September, artist Sophie Barber opens her show, *Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry* at Hastings Contemporary. Like many great stories, this is a journey that starts here, travels the world, sort of, and returns home triumphant. Born in 1996, it has taken less than thirty years to have a museum show of international importance in the town of her birth.

Picked up by the contemporary gallery Alison Jacques, of London's famed Cork Street at the young age of twenty-five, what's the secret to her meteoric rise and success? Was she chaperoned and guided by well connected parents, hand held through art school and her career kickstarted through nepotism? "No, they're not interested in art," she offers dead pan. Expanding on this, she claims her dad's interest in tropical plants and being a keen twitcher, are akin to the magpie qualities of her own practice. The laser focus, the sharp interest, the way he lives his life, is, she says, like an artist.



When we met, she was preparing big works for her big show. She was also clearing out her studio of some years in Brook Way Business Park to work more from home, and was just three weeks from giving birth for the first time. It was a stacked schedule. Putting all this aside for an hour, we talked about the self-confidence in her work and her belief in not needing to leave Hastings. She was always encouraged to pursue her interests by her parents, and she had little appetite to leave town. The huge expense and reduced space of living and studying in London felt like a no-brainer to avoid.

With family and friends, less pressure and a smaller peer group (just nine students!) at the University of Brighton's Hastings campus, "It just didn't really feel necessary to leave." She goes on, "I stayed here and I always made sure I had a studio. I made sure that I was making work all the time alongside being a gardener." Landscaping and heavy lifting were probably

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a help in manoeuvring her large canvases, "They're quite big lumps to move around!". Some of her pieces in the new show are real wall fillers. Previous giant canvases haven't just hung from the ceiling but have draped hammock-like between building partitions.



She loves scale. She's always made massive paintings, regardless of how small a studio space she's worked in, sometimes taking the work outside in pieces to reassemble. "I didn't want to compromise the vision of what I wanted the work to be, just because I was in a smaller space." At the other end of the scale, her 'pillow paintings' or 'cushion canvases', ("I call them neither - they're just paintings.") are plump three dimensional works filled with detritus, like masking tape, sweet wrappers and shoe covers to protect from oil paint in the studio. Of varying sizes, alluding to TVs, tablets and phones, some of these can be tiny, just single digit centimetres in their dimensions. They are all covered in her hallmark colourful thick brush strokes and text. Incredibly, the creative studio space had no bin - everything ended up getting sustainably shipped out in the stuffing of her most renowned pieces.

Sophie tells me she's dyslexic, and couldn't work in a shop because she couldn't add up. As such, her dad said she'd have to work with her hands. Hence the gardening, and of course the painting. The thick, impasto, giant painting. "He would actually say the big paintings were a bad idea because they're never going to sell. And for him, it wasn't like he understood the idea of making paintings to be shown. It was more for him like products. He didn't understand the process, the need to do it, the joy of doing it. I try not to think too much about it, but the necessity of doing these things, of making my work. There's an element of having to do it because it's all I've ever done. But I'm not suffering for my art. It doesn't feel like that at all."

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The trajectory to blue chip representation at the heart of the art world took three big leaps and some luck with who attended the exhibitions. The first of these was a group show at Flatlands, Bexhill (then at a Hastings site) co-founded and run by Ben Urban - subsequently her husband and biggest supporter. That was attended by Sarah McCrory, Director of Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art who invited her to show at the New Cross gallery, set within the campus of the famous art school. Alison Jacques, of the eponymous contemporary gallery, saw Sophie's art there and suggested they work together.

"Having a gallery to support you is really important and people can do it without and that's great but it's tough. Because it's really like baking cakes and trying to sell cakes without a shop. I think it just makes things harder and to have someone to speak in your corner and say what you're doing is important or valid is a big help."

With validation from the gallery and a firm instinct to stay put, Sophie is able to work on her own terms without interference. A benefit of Hastings she knows she would miss if peers were constantly asking if she had seen this show or other in the capital. When she includes artists and celebrities in her self-referential works, the choice is idiosyncratic and unpredictable. Other Millennials may cite Kim Kardashian or rap stars in their group chats or feeds, few would be familiar with the artist Franz West, who died in 2012. The latter's work being so much in conversation with her own practice, the Austrian Cultural Forum asked her to co-exhibit with him posthumously at their London site.

"I'm interested a bit in celebrity culture. I follow things like that. I know who's breaking up, who's staying together or whatever. But then I'm also interested in artists and it just ties in, I suppose, an obsession with things." In the Hastings Contemporary show keen eyes will see references to American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, another exponent of playing with scale. Indeed, the exhibition includes several signs, clues and connections with other artists and events, both personal and local, and more public and worldly.

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A little while ago, on the other side of the globe at the Frieze LA art fair, much to her amusement, Justin Bieber came across his own name and likeness in one of her paintings. It's an unlikely serendipitous quirk of working in the way she does and at the high level she does. In fact, she's the first to admit her art has travelled far more than she has. Paintings have been shown at exhibitions and fairs across Europe, Japan, China, Dallas and Los Angeles, as well as extensively in London and more locally in East Sussex.

Art is an arena for Sophie - a safe, inventive space where anything can happen, and anybody can be placed anywhere or with anyone. The freedom of intercepting reference points is unlike the disciplines of any other specialism, even within the creative industries. Painting is a boundless medium. Several occasions over the time we're together, she uses the term 'bringing in'. It's a funneling of disparate and multiple narratives and influences within her work. A meeting of moments: where the sun meets the sea, the land meets the sky, where David Hockney meets sunflowers, and Kendrick Lamar is at Camber Sands. It's a welcoming of visitors and locals to the exhibition, and wider town. It's about, both the term and the show, where we are in the world, with all of its noise and competing distractions. It's also about the universality of things - looking out to a horizon line on the ocean is the same wherever you may be, despite whatever horrors are behind you. It's about Hastings as a tonic to some of this, and what a special and unique place this is, and has been for Sophie all her life.

The show's title was chosen for its connection to the town, and the time of year it was being planned. Also because Sophie likes long titles, rhyming, and somewhat obscurely, and not entirely relevant to the exhibition, but certainly something to include in this feature, deflated bouncy castles. Hers is a mind that makes connections in ways uniquely her own. But in her unlikely scenarios and couplings, we're offered an equable alternative to reality, a parallel record of chance and humour. Places, things and people, both celebrities and artists, are on a level playing field, however topographically unlikely and close to the seafront.



Building on these different components, and the lyricism her work has found favour for around the world, proud husband and curator, Ben Urban states that, "It's the show of an artist based locally, it is not a local show." Where once the Jerwood Gallery may have been met with some local resistance, it now represents hope and aspiration for a creative town. Hastings Contemporary, as it has evolved into, is a well established national gallery with a broad educational outreach programme set to give the next generation the self belief and opportunities to live their creative lives as best they can. It stands against the limitations of being at the end of the line and seaside town deprivation. This show demonstrates what is possible.

Can you call this a homecoming, if Sophie's never left? It's a moot point. Congratulations are due, and not merely for this thought provoking, synapse tingling and fun exhibition. Sophie and Ben's son Rudy was born on August 9th. Parenting of a newborn is no easy ride, but as they made abundantly clear, it is by staying here, in Hastings, that they have both been able to build up their experience and careers, without the extra pressures and expense of big city life. Having grandparents and some family around for a little babysitting won't hurt either, as they'll be sure to find out.

The exhibition *Mackerel sky, mackerel sky, never long wet, never long dry* runs from 27 September to 15 March 2026 <https://www.hastingscontemporary.org/events/sophie-barber/>

Sophie Barber is represented by the gallery Alison Jacques <https://alisonjacques.com/exhibitions/sophie-barber>