

'Bringing in washing as storm clouds gather'

Celebrating Everyday Life

Mike Smith meets Ilkeston artist Rebecca Mercer whose vibrant paintings are gaining recognition

The washing on a clothes line is threatening to break away from its pegs under the power of a strong wind. A young mother is using one of her hands to unpeg the various items as quickly as possible and transfer them to a basket before a storm sets in. Her other hand is fully

occupied in holding on to her child, who is cradled in her protective arm. An unlikely subject for a painting? Not in the eyes of Ilkeston artist Rebecca Mercer, who sees great beauty in domestic cameos and has illustrated the heroic efforts of this particular young mother in a composition full of rhythm and colour.

When I saw this painting in Rebecca's spacious studio, I was reminded of a famous picture by Honoré Daumier. Usually called 'The Washerwoman', but also known as 'The Burden', it shows a woman bending against the weight of a bundle of washing she is carrying while somehow managing to keep a careful eye on the child who is toddling >



'Mother and child in laundrette'

alongside her. Acknowledging the resemblance in subject matter, Rebecca said, 'I love Daumier's pictures - when you come across the work of an artist who worked with ideas similar to your own, it is a deeply moving and exciting experience.'

The mechanics of dealing with the weekly wash have inspired a number of other paintings by Rebecca. One shows trousers on

a washing line losing their flatness under the force of a wind which has inflated them into the tubular shape they had when they were being worn. Another depicts a mother holding a child on her lap as she sits in front of a tumble dryer in a laundrette. Her head is framed by the machine's circular window, as though it were surrounded by a halo. To all intents and purposes, this image is a

'Madonna and Child' picture.

Rebecca believes that the spiritual references in some of her pictures stem from her upbringing and from her subsequent interests. She said, 'Having been brought up as a Catholic and educated at a small convent school in the Staffordshire town of Stone, I was surrounded by religious imagery from a very young age. I have a

long-standing interest in Buddhism, particularly the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, and I've spent a lot of time studying the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, who placed great emphasis on how the material and spiritual aspects of the world pervade each other.'

In fact, it was faith in the teachings of Rudolf Steiner that caused Rebecca and her husband to move to Ilkeston. Realising that their eldest child was unsettled at his secondary school, they secured a place for him at Michael House, the town's Steiner Waldorf school, where the emphasis is on developing the imagination and the joy of learning through practical, artistic and intellectual activity, rather than through anything resembling an academic 'hot house'.

Michael House owes its existence to Edith Lewis, the daughter of the owner of the Meridian hosiery factory, who expressed a wish that her legacy should be used to establish a school based on Rudolf Steiner's philosophical principles. It is said that she was moved to use her money in this way when she saw a vision of the archangel Michael while she was walking down Bath Street in Ilkeston. This story is the

inspiration for two of Rebecca's most unusual paintings. One depicts a woman floating above Bath Street, rather like a floating figure in a painting by Chagall. The other shows a woman ascending as an angel, with a pair of clouds for wings.

"Alongside all these activities, Rebecca has continued to paint, gradually perfecting her technique."

Rebecca knew that she wanted to be an artist at the age of twelve and was determined to fashion her educational choices to that end. After taking A-levels in English Literature, Art and Print-making, she completed an Art Foundation course before studying for a degree in Fine Art at Hull College of Art. On leaving college, she set up a small art business and sought commissions for illustrations and portraits, but her career plans soon stalled. She said: 'The happy, but unexpected, arrival of our first son led to my becoming a stay-at-home mum. Our second son was born three years later.'

However, Rebecca busied herself with various worthwhile projects while her children were growing up, much like the multi-tasking mothers who are the subject of many of her paintings. She took up voluntary work with the National Childbirth Trust, trained as a yoga teacher at an ashram in Wales and worked in the nursery section of Michael House. She also attended a course on the Steiner method of working with young children and now puts her knowledge into practice as a child-minder.

Alongside all these activities, Rebecca has continued to paint, gradually perfecting her technique. Explaining that her methods are based, in part, on the advice she received from an unexpected source, she said: 'As a student, I was fortunate to get to know a forger of Victorian animal paintings. He taught me many classical painting techniques and told me about the proper preparation of boards and the use of oil paint.'

Rebecca uses a sketchbook and a camera to record details and effects that will become elements in her compositions, which are worked up in her studio as meticulous drawings. These pencil sketches are then replicated in every detail as brightly- >



'The angel of Bath Street'



'Angel above Ilkeston church tower'

“Rebecca has the ability to take the ‘invisible’ moments of everyday life and give them value”

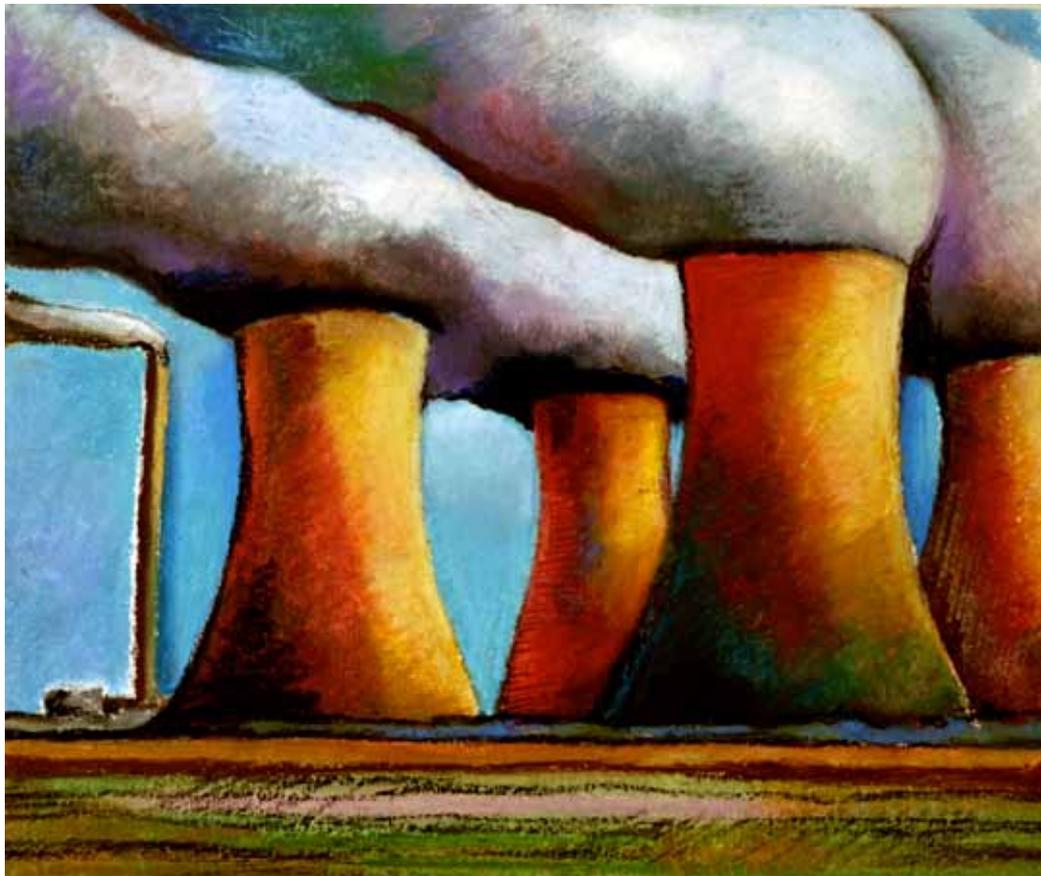
coloured oil paintings. Enthusing about the everyday world as a subject, she said: ‘I like to watch people as they go about their everyday tasks, just as young children do. Most adults tend not to notice the beauty of the fleeting moments of life, but children are never too busy to look at the world and realise how fascinating it is.’

It is not only the tasks that capture Rebecca’s attention, but also the appearance of the people who carry them out, because she is intrigued by the way the uniqueness of an individual is expressed through a particular hairstyle, an interesting tattoo or an unusual combination of shoes and jacket. She is also impressed by the striking geometry of the enormous coal-fired power stations that dominate much of the Trent Valley. Their gargantuan cooling towers and billowing plumes of steam are the subject of several paintings and a number of charcoal sketches.

As well as producing paintings, Rebecca has decorated ceramics with images in vibrant colours, produced quirky pictures of tree-houses based on natural forms, painted delightful illustrations for nursery rhymes and responded to a commission for new signs at a Buxton hotel. She is currently working on an illustrated children’s book based on the story of a child who imagines that he lives in a world populated by giraffes, because he heard his mother telling him that their house was full of draughts but mistakenly thought she said that their house was full of giraffes.

Although Rebecca has a studio packed with wonderful sketches and paintings, she has not promoted her art as much as her talent deserves. This is about to change, for she now has an excellent website and has been ‘discovered’ by Whitepeaks Fine Art Ltd, whose managing director Mark Pazik told me, ‘Her work was very well received at a recent show we put on at the Edinburgh Arts Fair and she will be our featured artist of the month for January.’ Neatly summing up her qualities as a painter, he added, ‘Rebecca has the ability to take the ‘invisible’ moments of everyday life and give them value’ ■

Rebecca Mercer’s work can be viewed on the online gallery www.whitepeaksfineart.co.uk and on Rebecca’s own website www.oneturningleaf.com



Above: ‘Cooling towers’
Left: Rebecca in her studio
Below: ‘Tree house’

