

CATHARINE ARMITAGE



After Catharine Armitage's marriage to Paul Feiler, she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. She shared her journey to becoming an artist in her own right with **Rebecca Weef Smith**



I spoke to Catharine shortly after her latest exhibition at The Redfern Gallery in London had closed to chat about her life and work.

The exhibition at The Redfern was a joint show alongside a retrospective of Paul Feiler's paintings, works on paper and prints. Paul and Catharine were together for 48 years, married for 43 of them and I began by asking Catharine if there was a connection between her meeting Paul in 1966 and becoming an artist.

"When we first met I didn't realise quite how well established an artist Paul was. I didn't know who he was, he was having a show in London at the Grosvenor Gallery but he didn't mention it to me. By the time I got to know he was a famous painter we were already firm friends."

After they had been together for about a year she asked him to teach her to draw and his response was to give her a pencil and paper and ask her to draw him. They would go out into the countryside and sketch and he encouraged her to attend life drawing classes. Within a few months Catharine was accepted as an undergraduate at The Slade; she was 23 and by the time she left at 29 was pregnant with their twins.

However, Catharine was clearly creative from a young age; she tells me of a painting she did at ten that won a school prize: a view from her bedroom window that she can still remember to this day. When she met Paul she was working in interior design. She herself says "I think it was all in there, it just took Paul to bring it out. Paul said he was born with a paintbrush in his hand. I knew I was interested in colour and textures but I never thought of myself as a career woman. In those days I expected I would go along with wherever my husband's career took me."

From today's perspective it seems odd that it was accepted that a woman would automatically give up a career for her family. Catharine says she feels lucky that Paul encouraged her to develop as a painter as many other male artists of his generation would have said "there can only be one artist in the household and it's going to be me." Paul always wanted Catharine to paint. They shared a studio, with him working downstairs and her on the upper floor. However, their working schedule was very different, with Paul choosing to go to the studio every

morning, coming back for lunch and working again until evening and Catharine painting when she felt like it.

"For a long time I felt guilty that I didn't see working as an artist as something I did every day. I fitted it in around peeling the potatoes. I was well into my fifties before I understood that I didn't need to feel guilty; I could paint in my own way and be productive. I need to think a lot about a painting and then I get to the studio and it all comes rushing out. At that point it paints itself, and it's often not a bit how I intended it to be."

Catharine finds inspiration from her surroundings and Cornwall is reflected in much of her work. The paintings are predominantly abstracts which contrast organic and geometric forms. Her work has always been a direct reaction to what she sees; it is always based on reality and she frequently uses photos she takes of the Cornish landscape as her inspiration. She

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tells me she has always wanted her work to be about the visual representation; there is no message or agenda.

After Paul died in 2013, Catharine was unsure whether she would paint again; she knew that Paul would want her to but she also knew that she couldn't continue to work from the studio they had shared. Within a year she found herself tempted by a photo her son had sent to her, an image of two nanocells which had formed a heart. The subsequent painting she called Farewell.

"It is always about what I see. I react to things I've seen. Over the years, it's been more abstract, but at the moment I'm being a bit more realistic." In the recent show at The Redfern there were a few paintings which portrayed actual objects; the one titled John's Gate was based on that real gate. However, Catharine also visually responds to her own previous work, coming back to a piece and being influenced to take an idea into a new work. At the bottom of her bed there used to hang a painting of Paul's but it was transported to the Jerwood Gallery and that left a space. Ever practical, Catharine filled



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Indian Summer

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it with one of her own paintings from 1978 "because it was the right size." She hadn't looked at that work for quite a while. It had a "blotchy background and some shapes on it. When I went to my studio I found myself painting a similar background. I had a photo I had taken of a boulder from a clifftop in Cornwall and that was worked into this background, so the new painting is a combination of the two visual images. There is a direct line between those two. That's my progression. One is 1978 and one 2018."

The show at the Redfern felt like a true celebration of the relationship Catharine and Paul had as artists as well as husband and wife. Catharine felt she didn't have enough work to fill the gallery on her own. She was asked by the Redfern if she would like a show and she was the one who suggested combining her work with Paul's. "My work is my own but it worked to show together."

That seems to me very typical of Catharine's generosity. She tells me her family has always come first, being an artist had to fit around family life. And family life has created the inspiration for work. "I think my next painting will be two trees I spotted on a walk with my grandsons."

But her paintings in themselves are generous - they share a love of shape, colour and form which is very pleasing. Catharine says she wants her paintings to make people feel good, to give pleasure and to be part of people's lives that they want to return to. "I am happy if it makes people happy."

Someone who had been at the Slade with Catharine (but whom she hadn't seen since) had seen the show at the Redfern and left a note for her there to say thank you, and how much he loved the silence in her work. They are calm paintings; there is nothing busy or unnecessary in them. As Catharine says, she is content. "I have had a lovely life. It's been very satisfying. If you meet me in ten years' time I hope you would get the same feeling from my work. I don't think the paintings will be very different. My work does progress, for instance, for a long time I would stick bits of canvas on my work then paint on top. I don't any more. I realised I was hiding behind the collage, a bit like a fringe, and I thought I would see if I could do without it. So I did for years. This year I wondered how it would feel to collage again. I tried it, but I tore it all off, it wasn't me anymore." ■

