



JACKIE GARNER

A businesslike attitude has propelled **JACKIE GARNER** into a successful artistic career, and as **KATRINA VAN GROUW** discovers, being neat and tidy hasn't diminished her creativity.



ARTISTS AND their studios are much like dog owners and their dogs – there's usually more than a passing resemblance. This issue of *Bird Art & Photography* brought me to Jackie Garner's new studio in Randwick, near Stroud, which I found to be every bit as tidy and businesslike as its owner.

Jackie's is the sort of studio you could take your mother to; your grandmother, even, without risk of offence or injury. The low beams are clearly marked with warning signs to mind one's head; there's no clutter or mess on the floor and, in the unlikely event that anything should still go wrong, she's covered by comprehensive public liability insurance.

Jackie insists that the extreme cleanliness and orderly appearance is in preparation for the forthcoming Open Studios where the public can visit artists working in their own environment. Somehow, I suspect that it is usually like that.

If I was an artist living alone, I'd probably wash every third day and not be particularly bothered if my socks matched or if my T-shirt was on inside out. But Jackie is always immaculately turned out and very stylishly dressed. Even in the field, the wind doesn't seem to blow on her and mud doesn't seem to stick.

Delayed impact

One could be forgiven for assuming that Jackie Garner is new to the bird art profession. In the last few years she's suddenly appeared out of nowhere and planted her flag firmly in the top ranks of the genre. Indeed, at this year's British Birdwatching Fair her professional-looking double stand and spotlight performance in the Events Marquee made her difficult to miss.

In reality, she's been a practising artist for most of her adult life, professionally employed within the genre for 17 years; and she knows

Jackie Garner brings a sense of order to the creative process – and to the studio environment. Katrina was particularly impressed by the polished floor!



Golden Plovers pretending to be boulders is the subject of *Home To Roost*. Jackie loves the visual relationship between birds and their environment and tries to incorporate this aspect in many of her paintings.



Jackie's spacious studio can even accommodate a small gallery wall to show off her latest work.



The Old Cider House – a perfect studio. Jackie's mother used to pick flowers in the lane outside.



Flightless Steamer Ducks at home in the kelp caught Jackie's attention on a life-changing trip to the Falklands.

as much about art as anyone else I know.

Since it first came into being, Jackie was Education Officer at Nature in Art, that splendid museum of natural history art situated at Twigworth, just outside Gloucester. There she lived and breathed the subject; she spent her free time watching and drawing birds, and countless evenings talking birds and bird art over a few glasses of wine with artists like me who came for week-long residencies.

But it's difficult to do justice to your own creative work when you have a day job. And difficult to do justice to your job when you're really an artist.

And then there's the matter of personal identity – the need to address that all-important question, 'what do you do?'

There are events that turn one's life around. For Jackie it was a visit to The Falklands in 2005 shortly after her 40th birthday, when they say that life begins. After that there was no looking back. Within a short while it was goodbye day job and hello full-time artist.

But first there was the small matter of accommodation. Nature in Art had provided a flat within the museum. It must have been a cool place to take a date home to – a Georgian manor house with a mile-long driveway. That sacrifice alone would be enough to make most people think twice about leaving. But fortunately Jackie was not discouraged.

A search on the Internet yielded a beautiful Cotswold stone house – an old cider barn, in fact – with a private driveway and an upstairs room that was destined to be somebody's perfect studio.

And not only that. It was in Randwick, the village where Jackie's grandfather used to run the local pub, and where her mother was born and grew up.

Her mother remembers picking celandines in the lane outside the house where Jackie now lives and works. It was like coming home, and it couldn't have been more perfect.

Jackie is not a morning person. It's the only time you'll see her looking slightly dishevelled. Even so, she resists all urges to



The business side of things. The list of things to do hangs above the desk like the Ten Commandments. Note the magazine at the top of the pile...

linger in bed and begins work on the dot of 9 o'clock every day. First she deals with administrative tasks: answering e-mails, marketing, and following up potential opportunities for the future.

After that, the creative work begins. Jackie's involved with several projects at a time and tries to devote a portion of the week to each of them. Nature in Art, like any other live-in job, was good preparation for working unsociable hours, so she ploughs on diligently until nine or ten o'clock each night, including weekends and bank holidays.

The television was the first casualty of this new regime; that disappeared in 2006. Having just acquired one myself after 15 years of abstinence, I'm impressed that anyone can sleep at night without a mind-numbing dose of *Crime Scene Investigation*, or other escapist fun, though Jackie does admit to missing Wimbledon.

Weekends are kept special by the ritual of having something different for breakfast and visiting the local farmers' market. Everybody

needs *some* structure to their working week.

Her time management is ruthlessly strict, which she says (in apparent contradiction) allows her to be flexible when she chooses. Bird artists need a degree of flexibility. For example, if something interesting turns up, or if the light is unexpectedly exquisite outdoors, you need to be able to put down what you're doing and go off to enjoy it.

A sense of fun

A devoted rather than fanatical birder, Jackie will 'twitch' local rarities, but gets equal pleasure from everyday, common birds; especially in their visual interaction with their environment.

For example, while in the Falklands, the ubiquitous dumpy, mottled-grey Flightless Steamer Ducks seemed rather dull – until she watched them foraging among the kelp on the shore. Then the shapes and patterns interacted in a way that sent her immediately reaching for her pencil.

And she would never have conceived

producing a painting of humble Woodpigeons – that is, until she enjoyed the play of light and dappled shadows across their back as they sat perched in the tree outside her window. It's not so much a painting of Woodpigeons as a painting of soft light through foliage.

One thing that I admire about Jackie's work is that she's not afraid to have fun. Birds can be funny, and a little bit of anthropomorphism here and there can, more often than not, increase one's enjoyment of them. Of all her subjects, Jackie is best known for her penguins; and of all birds, penguins lend themselves to humour.

Her painting of a procession of Rockhopper Penguins following their zig-zag path up from the sea, reminiscent of Escher's famous staircase, is particularly endearing. Likewise, is the party of Rockhoppers strolling flipper to flipper along the beach – for all the world like that popular painting by Jack Vettriano.

Jackie's father is a keen birder with a substantial library, so it came as a surprise to her parents when as a child, Jackie chose



Jack Vetrano – penguin style. *Heading Home* is one of Jackie’s most deservedly popular images.

a bird book – Richard Fitter’s *Birds of Britain and Europe* – as a school prize. Why on earth would she want a bird book when her home was full of them?! But this one was her own, and she’s treasured it to this day.

The Ross’s Gull illustration particularly captured her imagination, so it was a memorable day indeed when she ‘accidentally’ discovered one on a visit to Norfolk one frosty dawn in the 1980s. I asked her if she had any travel ambitions. “To see British wintering birds in their breeding haunts in the Arctic,” was the reply.

Most of Jackie’s creations begin life as a pencil sketch. Only occasionally, when

she’s feeling particularly confident, will she launch straight into watercolour. She traces the drawing to make any alterations, and when these are completed the finished composition is transferred onto watercolour paper using a graphite sheet that works in the same way as carbon paper.

Jackie’s paper of choice is Fabriano Artistic, which she buys in pre-stretched blocks. It’s a forgiving paper which allows one to remove paint without damaging the surface. She uses thin layers of colour which she builds up gradually to give quite a detailed, illustration-type finish, and applies the paint with large, but finely pointed, sable brushes which hold

more paint than the tiny ones.

Larger paintings get a different approach. They are invariably in acrylic as she says she doesn’t have the patience to allow for the drying time of oils. Acrylics allow her to keep working on a painting, doing whatever she thinks it needs – correcting, modifying, glazing and dry-brushing – without disturbing the lower layers and creating mud!

Increasingly these days she begins a painting by making abstract marks over a rough compositional drawing. She uses a variety of materials – her fingers, sponges, brushes – anything that comes to hand, and allows the marks to suggest parts of the habitat, gradually tightening and enhancing the image as she goes along. Only when a painting stops annoying her does she declare it finished.

Jackie’s invested a lot in her change of career and means to make it succeed, so she’s put an equal amount of effort into running her business effectively as she has into the artwork itself.

The Stroud area is blessed with a thriving artistic community – maybe something to do with the number of disused industrial buildings that could be utilised as arts studios. This community is more than adequately served with a wealth of training opportunities specifically aimed at the arts professions, and Jackie has made full use of this to hone her business and marketing skills.

She showed me some puzzles that bear her designs. Playing Devil’s advocate, I asked her how such run-of-the-mill commercial work was different from having a day job. She pointed out her name on the packaging.



A work in progress during Katrina’s visit, this painting of Wood Pigeons is not so much a portrait of the birds, but a celebration of the play of light through the trees.



Going Up; Coming Down is the title of this painting of Rockhopper Penguins on their well-used path to the sea.

Next issue ‘In The Studio’ features sculptor Martin Hayward-Harris

Commercialism it may be; but it’s spreading her name, developing her skills and allowing her to exist on her own terms as an artist. You can’t get a better answer than that.

Jackie also has a fairy godmother in the form of her sister Paula, a computer whizz kid who has made it her personal mission in life to get Jackie’s website onto page 1 of a Google search for wildlife artists, and to keep her there.

If you attended the British Birdwatching Fair this year then there’s a 50/50 chance that you would have seen the sister – though you would never have known it. Jackie has what every exhibitor wants – an identical twin to help on her stand!

We spent the evening in passionate discussion about the importance of drawing. Though we both refer to photographs when we have to, we share the belief that there’s absolutely no substitute for observational drawing from a variety of subjects.

Old school virtues

We were both fortunate to have had tutors of the ‘old school’ who had insisted on drumming into us the formal skills: still lifes of white or reflective objects; life drawing; the science of ellipses and perspective...

As the wine began to flow, we spoke fondly of these cantankerous old gentlemen, quite forgetting how we loved to hate them at the time. No doubt they would be deeply touched if they knew the lasting influence they’ve had on us.

Jackie would be the first to admit that she’s still learning; still evolving a language of expression that’s completely her own. Experimental and tentative, she allows her observations of the subject to dictate her style – which incidentally is not a bad practice for any of us to learn.

Perhaps her work will take on its own hallmark, or perhaps it will continue to change. Jackie’s not rushing things, but allowing it to develop at its own pace, steadily and methodically – in a totally businesslike manner. ■

To see more of Jackie’s work, including her project illustrating the wildlife art of ancient Egypt, visit: www.jackiegarner.co.uk

i Katrina Van Grouw

Katrina recently gave up her day job as bird group curator at the Natural History Museum in Tring to concentrate fulltime on her art and writing. As well as her regular articles for this magazine, she is working on the manuscript of a book to be called *The Unfeathered Bird*.

Visit: www.unfeatheredbird.com for more information.