

A world of colour

When artist and gallery owner Serena Hall came to Southwold to live as a child she immediately fell in love with the seaside town. Mike Trippitt talks to her about why it so inspires her

ON entering Southwold's Serena Hall Gallery, thoughts of the outside world are wrested from the mind by a bombardment of striking, bold images. Artist Serena Hall sits in the first floor bay window, her apron stained with the same rich, vibrant colours that shout cheerily from the paintings around her.

Talk with her for a moment and the visitor is transported effortlessly into her world, a world of colour, of emotion and of her Southwold.

"Southwold suits me down to the ground," she enthuses. "I love this place so much, the peace, the quiet and the beauty." This year the 44-year-old artist is celebrating 25 years of painting Suffolk's timeless seaside town. An exhibition of her latest work runs for the rest of the year.

"There are some key paintings in the exhibition," she says, handing over the impressive catalogue. "And a collection

of ceramics and mixed media. It is a good cross-section of the kind of work I have been doing over the years." Serena's family moved to Southwold when she was 11, relocating to Ferry Road from the family home in Wimbledon. She and her brother, Spencer, made friends quickly.

"We were both instantly happy here. It was fantastic. I went from living in a busy area in London to suddenly overlooking the beach and the sea from my bedroom window. It was incredible, absolutely incredible. We never took it for granted. We knew how special Southwold was. It was a very special time."

Creativity and colour were part of everyday life. Both her mother and grandmother were potters, and her father was an established writer. Her parents urged her to draw and paint, and to make gifts for family members. Even before going to art college she was painting in bright, vivid colours, and the style for which she is now renowned was forged. But that style was not without opposition.

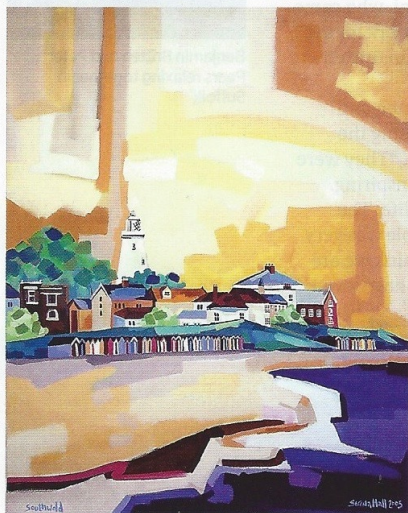
During an intense two years at the Edinburgh College of Art her tutor was critical. "He didn't really like colour and I really had to fight. We butted heads really.

He would say 'Why do you have to use this bright colour? Why don't you use creams and coffees

and greys?' I really struggled with that." But when the end-of-course show came around her determination to remain true to herself paid off.

"I got so much attention, because mine was the only work that stood out. It was so different and I thought, thank goodness I stuck to my guns." Turning down offers of work in commercial design, Serena returned to Southwold to do what her heart wanted, to

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paint bright colour and to paint her home.

"I knew I didn't want to paint Southwold as grey. I wanted to paint the emotional connection people have with Southwold and the emotional effect it has on me." She worked initially from a studio outside the town, and then from premises in East Street. Later, when a suitable space for a gallery became available, she saw an opportunity.

Initially the bank refused her request for a loan, but then she got a phone call from the bank manager.

"He said he was going to do something that he had never done in his whole career. He was going to change his mind and let me have funding. It was enough to get the key in this door and get the gallery started. That was 17 years ago. I didn't have a penny to my name and I made it from nothing. My bank manager was with me for a further ten years and has seen my success. He was really pleased that he changed his mind.

"I wasn't commercially minded when I first opened up. It wasn't a case of making lots of money. It has never been about that. It was about opening up and selling my work. I think some people have a romantic idea of being an artist. Yes, it is a lifestyle, and I wouldn't want to do anything else, but to be an artist you have to sell, you have to make a living.

"I haven't been painting to suit the crowd, that's not how it works. It frightens me to think of doing something else. That's why I work really, really hard to make sure that never happens. I love my work and I love being in my studio. My paintings reflect how I feel about Southwold and my customers tell me that my work depicts how they feel about it too. I am so thankful for that."

Serena lost her mother to cancer before she was a teenager, and her father to the same disease just as she was starting her career. While her work helped her cope with her loss – "My work saved me in a way, it became my



Serena Hall



total focus" – she turned to The Prince's Trust.

"When I lost my dad, the Prince's Trust was great. They helped me buy a kiln to get me going with my ceramics. They gave me access to a gentleman who I spoke with fortnightly to give me advice about my work. Obviously I didn't have the person who I would have turned to. The man was lovely, very supportive and a bit of a sounding board. The Prince's Trust is an extraordinary charity. It was just that bit of help at the right time and it made all the difference."

Serena's talent, her determination and vision caught the trust's eye. In 2001 she won the Prince's Young Business Woman Of The Year Award and was rewarded further in 2008 by a visit from Prince Charles and the Duchess Of Cornwall. "I was the first person they visited when they came to Southwold. It was a wonderful day though quite nerve-racking. The streets were cordoned off. People were queuing with their flags. We saw

the helicopter land and then they were driven up to visit me at the gallery. They bought quite a few things as well." Does every artist have royal visitors? Serena's humility and modesty give way to justified pride. "No, not really.

It was quite an amazing day.

Amazing things have happened over the years."

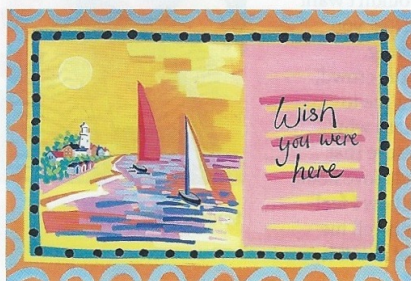
Serena Hall's is an emotional story, laced with a love of Southwold, enriched with colour and touched by tragedy.

"I had so little expectation back at the start that it is only in the last few years that I have been able to look back and think that it has been quite a journey. I do believe in positive thinking, having goals and being focused.

"We grew up with passionate people.

Whatever you do in life, you have to be passionate. My brother and I have tried to remember that. It's very important." ♦

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IS IT A BEACH HUT? NO, IT'S A SHED

This year a full size glass beach hut, created by Serena as a labour of love, has made the final of Shed Of The Year on Channel 4's Amazing Spaces series. Called My Inch – The Southwold Glass Hut (after her Ferry Road childhood home, The Inch) it was four years in the making. "I was just at the point in time where I wanted to create something that was really beautiful, very colourful and very inspired by Southwold. So I wanted to make it look like a beach hut.

"I had the idea of a glass hut, almost a memory box, and as a 'thank you' to my mum and dad. I think it is so important to have a happy childhood. It is such an important time of life as it shapes you as an adult. I had that. So I wanted to make something that people can go into to be reminded of a happy childhood. "It was a bizarre idea, I have quite a lot of bizarre ideas. If I have done it correctly, it should tell my story and people should have an emotional response to it."