

all Plain SAILING

Artist and gallery owner Tony Huggins-Haig's cheerful boat paintings raise a smile and record a vanished world. He tells Emma Newrick about listening to his Grandad's advice, forging a career in art against the odds, and a rather unusual gorilla

Tony Huggins-Haig vividly remembers the moment he decided to be an artist. 'I was about five or six, and I was busy doodling. My grandad said to me, "So, are you going to follow me into the fishing industry?" I said "No, Grandad. I'm going to be an artist." There was a silence, and then he said "Well, you stick at that son, but I think you'll probably find you're going to be fishing instead."

Tony would be the first to admit he wasn't academically brilliant. 'I went to the Secondary Modern school in Alnwick, and like most boys at that age, I wasn't really focused academically – I preferred kicking about with my mates.' At that time, there wasn't much support available for those with dyslexia, like Tony, and though he was intelligent he struggled when it came to getting words down on paper. Art, however, was a different matter. 'It's something I've been interested in for as long as I can remember, and while I probably wasn't the best in the class at school, I was certainly in the top five.' Some of Tony's earliest memories are of sitting with his grandad listening to his stories about the war, and drawing planes, later progressing to the fishing boats he saw in the harbours along the coast.



He never did end up a fisherman – by the time Tony left school the shipyards were almost gone, and the North East fishing fleets had dwindled – instead he joined the army. 'I was a square peg in a round hole, really. I used to question orders – so you can imagine I wasn't well suited to army life!' However, the army did give him the determination to see anything through – an attitude that stood him in good stead with his art. He did a degree in Applied Geology at Sunderland University, and stayed on to do a Masters, but continued to draw and paint over the years, through a succession of different jobs from labouring to cleaning windows. Finally, in 2004, he was at the point in his career as an artist where he was able to do it full time, and The Art House Gallery, in Kelso, was born.

Since then, Tony explains, the gallery has been one of the few businesses to buck the recession trend, expanding by a factor of ten over the past five years or so. It is now round the corner from the original site, and boasts five different galleries filled with art, and a unique 'boat' entrance based on one of Tony's own artworks.

Tony himself is best known for his depictions of boats, but there's more to his artwork than that. 'My work is colourful and fun. I like to record the way things were, and I'm also interested in people's journeys. I was lucky enough to be commissioned to create a piece for Tony Blair's retirement in 2007 that records

his time in office. I met with the people he worked with, visited the places he'd been, and photographed his house and grounds. It's a bit like being a historian through art. I also try to change the way people feel through my work, especially in these hard times. I try to bring a smile to their faces with texture and bright colours, and I'll often put a bit of humour in too. It's very hard to stand up and have your own style – I could paint a watercolour the same way a thousand other artists would do it, but it's harder to do things differently. I suppose my work could be described as quirky or naive – it's certainly colourful, but I don't worry about how to describe it, I just paint it.'

He admits that in common with most artists, he'd love to work completely on location, but as he juggles his own art with running the gallery, he does work from photos and reference books too. He's constantly inspired, 'I could be walking down the street and spot a little lad pulling a wheelie on his bike, and that would remind me of my childhood, and a picture is born. I'll go shopping with my wife, and I'll leave her to get on with things. Meanwhile I sit in Costa near the window and just people-watch. I'll fill a sketchbook with drawings, and when she comes back I'll have all these ideas for new work.'



Visitors to the gallery often ask how long one of Tony's pieces takes to create. 'I always say it takes a lifetime to hone your skills and style, which isn't opting out of answering the question, it's just a fact. The piece I did for Tony Blair took about four months, but I can create something in a week if it's one of those rare times when the world leaves me alone to just get on and paint in my studio. It's very enjoyable though! I don't know if it's because I'm dyslexic, but sometimes I deliberately go against all the teaching about how you're supposed to paint, with the background and the foreground and so on. Once I just painted a boat without any of that! I think it's important to test yourself sometimes.'

Tony is delighted that he's been successful enough to run the gallery and make art his full time career, but he does have a few ambitions. 'I'd love to have an exhibition somewhere like BALTIC. Sometimes what I suppose you'd call grassroots people visit my gallery, and they've been to BALTIC and think it's full of rubbish. I don't agree at all, I think it's full of work that challenges you and makes you think, but I do know where they're coming from. I sometimes think it would be nice if they set aside one of their galleries once in a while for the work of a northern artist like me, especially when you think that both BALTIC and my work are linked to the Tyne in a massive way, with the shipbuilding industry and the way people worked together in the community when we had those industries. Sting



is a great collector of work by northern artists, and I have a lot of time for him. I've been told that he's got one of my paintings, but I don't know for certain. I suppose I'd just like to leave something behind that makes people think, and hopefully lifts their spirits.'

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Someone else Tony has a lot of time for is Rolf Harris. 'What you see is what you get. He opened the new part of the gallery, with the boat sculpture at the entrance, and he spent a lot of time chatting to visitors, especially those with kids. He made those children feel special, and they'll remember that for the rest of their lives.' Rolf was particularly taken with the educational visits The Art House Gallery offers. 'I believe that art should put back into the community,' Tony explains, 'so we do educational visits, provide all the materials, and try to make the experience as engaging for the kids as we can. They enter through the boat sculpture so they don't feel like they're in a traditional gallery, and we give them

different tasks to do – mainly art-based but some arithmetic as well, things like "How many trees can you see in that gallery?" We normally work with primary schools but we've just had a group of young offenders in, and it's great to see them stepping outside their comfort zones. Some of the sculpture in the gallery is designed around young people, using recycled metalwork. Children come in with long faces because they're being dragged round the shops, and we say, "Go upstairs and see the orange gorilla. There's three questions for you to answer about it, and then you'll get a sweet." Straightaway you've got them on side because you've mentioned sweets! We've got artworks with a shark, two planes, the Angel of the North – it's not your typical gallery, and the kids love coming. The children that visit have a great time, and with the educational visits we usually go to the school afterwards to see the exhibition they've produced, and you can see you've made a difference. Not everyone in that classroom's going to grow up to be an artist, but you've set their imaginations alight.'

Tony deliberately set out to make The Art House different to other galleries. 'Most galleries just sell art, or they're like the Tate where you can wander round and you either love or hate the show. We sell great artwork, but we also aim to do other things, like the educational work. By the time I was working as a full time artist, I had built friendships with lots of commercially successful artists, either people I'd met through my own work or because I'd collected their art – I've been a collector for about 30 years. I wanted to help build people's careers and profiles, and I wanted to showcase work from established artists and up and

coming ones. We aim to do bi-monthly or quarterly exhibitions – the next one is our Best of British in time for the Jubilee, and the great thing is that people have the chance to meet the artists, rather than just buy the work straight off the walls. We aren't high pressure salespeople, either. Most galleries find that people walk in, buy something, and they never see them again. It's different for us – around 80 percent of visitors are repeat customers.'

'Putting something back' is a philosophy that Tony is both practical and passionate about. 'We had a young lad who used to work at the gallery on Saturdays, and to cut a long story short, we supported his application to Dundee University to study design, and he's now working in the graphics industry.' Last year, Tony learned to fly light aircraft, and while he was at the airfield, discovered there was a boy from a difficult background who was always helping out but couldn't afford flying lessons. Tony paid for his training syllabus, some of his lesson costs, and the boy now has a flying bursary. Tony himself is characteristically modest, saying that as he had a hard journey from growing up on a council estate to get to where he is now, he believes in helping others where he can. 'To me it's about putting things back. None of us are going to be here forever, and so while we are we should try to make a positive impact on people's lives. If everyone tried to do that, imagine how much better the world would be for everyone.'

He's achieved so much already, but says his real ambition is to fly around the world. 'That would be amazing, for a boy from

a council estate who grew up watching war films and running round pretending to be a plane! Obviously I wouldn't want to drop bombs – I'm passionate about peace, actually. It's important to remember the past, and to learn from it. I'd like to spread a positive message, and I'm actually having some artwork fitted to my plane at the moment that represents some of my paintings. Maybe seeing it flying past will cheer people up!'

As a keen art collector, the temptation for Tony to take home the work on the gallery walls must be overwhelming at times. 'I do have a great collection, including a fantastic Norman Cornish, but I have been very strict with myself the past few years. If I get a piece in that I think is amazing, I'll put it in the gallery, and if it hasn't sold after two months it might come home with me! It is a business, so I can't take everything home. I love the mixture we've got in the gallery, though, established artists and new ones emerging all the time. I love the North East and I love artwork pertaining to the North East: Peter Knox with his shipyards, Alexander Millar's "gadgies", Keith Proctor's kids playing and Jeff Rowland's rainy scenes. It's really refreshing that there's so much talent up here. In football terms, Newcastle may have finished fifth, but in the art scene, the North East really is top of the league.' It's a description that could just as easily be applied to The Art House Gallery, and to the artist himself.

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