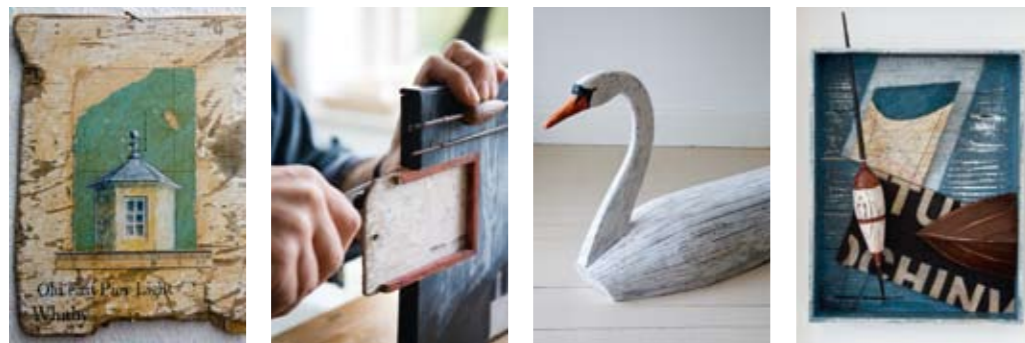


ANTIQUES OF THE FUTURE

From sea to shore

Artist **Alex Malcolmson** might live in Harrogate but his beautiful seascapes and sculptures capture the allure of the maritime world

FEATURE CAROLINE WHEATER PHOTOGRAPHS JANE SEBIRE



Although artist Alex Malcolmson lives and works in the elegant Yorkshire market town of Harrogate, he still longs for the wilder shores of Shetland where he grew up. 'The weather changes so quickly there – you can see it rolling in,' he says. His collections of sailing ephemera – ship's tools, compasses, wooden items and 19th-century ship portraits – are testament to this yearning, amassed as much for their beauty, one suspects, as for their capacity to keep these memories alive.

Up in his first-floor studio, Alex looks out on to a typical suburban back garden but his mind's eye is out at sea or back in the small fishing port of Lerwick, his childhood home, as he constructs his wooden birds and 'box works' – collages of painted images, hunks of driftwood and handmade objects arranged within a deep wooden frame. 'My box pictures are landscape paintings in a sense, and they have a strong sense of place. I use a lot of references to Shetland and the sea – it may be a lighthouse or a map or a fishing float,' he explains.

New found freedom

At 55, Alex has only recently become a full-time artist and he's relishing every minute. For 25 years, his art was a hobby, squeezed into spare moments

when he was not busy helping the careers of other artists through the Godfrey & Watt gallery in Harrogate, a joint venture with his wife Mary. Now the gallery has become an internet-based business, freeing him up to concentrate on his own pieces. 'Over the last 10 to 15 years I've worked towards where I am now. I knew that if I didn't close the gallery, I wouldn't have the time.'

Although his parents were not artistic in the traditional sense, his mother was a talented knitter of Fair Isle jumpers and his father was one of those men who knew how to mend everything. 'As a Shetland islander, he had to,' smiles Alex. 'Islanders are a pretty self-reliant bunch and I've always believed that I could make anything happen by doing it myself.' From his early teens Alex painted and sketched constantly, capturing scenes of Shetland and copying the paintings of Cézanne. From 1972, Alex spent 'four blissful years' honing his techniques while studying for a degree in fine art at Edinburgh College of Art.

Armed with a post-graduate teaching qualification, he then returned to Shetland, where he taught art to schoolchildren all over the Northern Isles. 'I loved being there but teaching didn't come naturally to me. My heart wasn't in it.' After a four-year stint, Edinburgh called again



COLLECTING ALEX'S WORK
Roadshow expert John Foster has a lifelong love of all things nautical



'There is a lot of this kind of art about but most of it looks a bit cheap. Having run the Godfrey & Watt gallery, Alex appreciates that quality of ideas and their skilful representation is key to the success of an artist. His work harks back to the 19th century but the colours he uses would sit happily in a modern home. It also taps into the fantasy of living by the sea and escaping the pressures of life. A good sign of how collectable someone will become is how quickly their work sells out – and Alex's pieces go fast.'

Facing page, from left Alex combines painted images with hunks of driftwood; constructing a box painting consisting of various 'found' elements; a hollow swan made of slatted wood; fishing floats are common motifs. This page Alex pictured at home among examples of his box paintings and birds



‘Scandinavian lighthouses, rock markers and other ships have inspired a lot of my work’



and he took a post as the curator of the Scottish Crafts Collection. ‘It was a lovely job, which I did for another four years,’ says Alex. ‘I would buy for the collection, curate and exhibit it. It was a golden age of potters, jewellers, wood turners and glass makers.’ It also gave him the confidence to start his own arts and crafts gallery in 1985.

Honing a style

Alex’s long involvement with artists of all disciplines has influenced his approach. ‘Painting was never quite enough for me – I’d rather challenge perceptions of what art is,’ he says. ‘When you make something using found materials and focus on surface texture and form, it is a richer way of creating an image. I want my pieces to be like a Seamus Heaney poem: a blend of lots of elements that pull together to put you in a spot.’


Alex tends to work on several pieces at once until they are ‘in balance’, a process that could take several months. ‘If I plan out what I do, it doesn’t work,’ he says. ‘But when I’m beginning a new box picture, I usually have something to start with, such as an object or a sketch of a place I’m thinking about. We’ve been on several sailing trips around Scandinavia on an old ship called the ‘Bessie Ellen’ and the fantastic lighthouses, rock markers and other ships we’ve seen have been the inspiration behind a lot of my work over the last few years.’

Driftwood is a material that he often incorporates into his pictures, along with hand-carved fishing floats and little model ships. He finds the discarded wood in Shetland, where he returns every year or two, and on the beaches of Teesside. ‘Generally, I find pieces of mahogany,

larch and pine, which are the best woods for character. The holy grail for me is finding driftwood with weathered paint on it – paint gives you the key to how to start off. I do occasionally use new woods, such as cherry, but I try to find something that’s lived before.’

Alex uses the simplest of tools – power saws, rasps and files – to shape and finish the wood. ‘I’m not interested in the finesse of carving. I keep it broad and simple but well-made,’ he says. Where paint is required, he puts on a layer of acrylic then rubs it back, a process that continues until the surface meets his high standards. His colours are muted, in the tradition of Scandinavian painters. ‘It’s less about colour than tone,’ he says.

In the last three years he has been making wooden birds – particularly swans and diving birds – influenced by the American tradition of decoy birds and the work of sculptor Guy Taplin, a good friend. In contrast to Taplin’s solid birds, Alex’s are hollow: concave shapes built out of slats of wood. ‘In Shetland, when a boat comes to the end of its life, you take it home and upturn it to make a hen house or a bench – that’s where my birds come from,’ he says.

Steadily, Alex’s work is being noticed, with a Christmas show at the Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh and another coming up at the savvy St Jude’s Gallery in Itteringham, Norfolk, this spring. Yet his prices remain resolutely affordable, from £200 for a diving bird to £800 for a half-metre long swan. His proudest sale to date has been to the poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who bought a speckled diving bird with a quirky fish in its beak. She clearly knows poetry when she sees it. 



Clockwise from far left **A box painting in nautical colours;** Alex uses driftwood in most of his work; his Harrogate studio is redolent of the sea; a wooden diving bird painted in Scandinavian-style colours; Alex shapes a bird with a rasp; Alex’s wall-mounted diving birds are influenced by masks made by the Yupik Inuits; two carved fish await placement in box paintings; Alex takes some measurements of a bird that has had an early coat of acrylic white paint



See more of Alex’s work at alexmalcolmsen.co.uk. His show at St Jude’s Gallery, Itteringham runs until 23rd April (01263 587666; stjudesgallery.co.uk). Another show at Vaila Fine Art in Lerwick, Shetland begins in July (01595 697374; vailafineart.co.uk).