

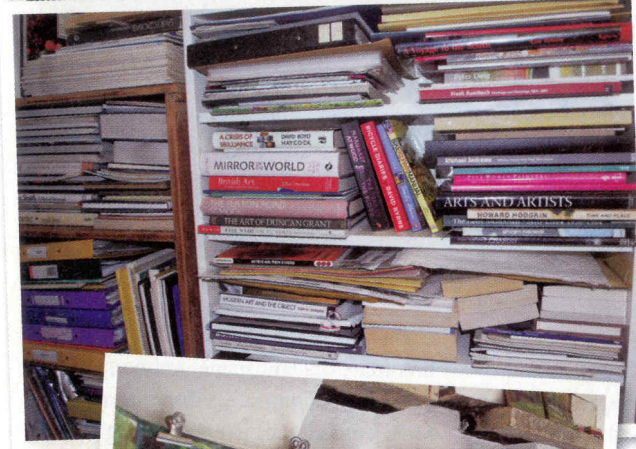
MY STUDIO

Sarah Spackman

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: JENNY WHITE



Sarah spends a large amount of time outdoors. "I quite often work on the final pictures outside – if the weather permits it!"



ARTIST'S BIO

Name
Sarah Spackman
Born
Ireland, 1958
Training
Byam Shaw School of Art;
Camberwell College of Arts
Next event
Open Studios, Edith Road
Workshops, Oxford,
4-5 December
More info
www.sarahspackman.com

Tucked between the genteel terraced streets of south Oxford and the green expanse of Hinksey Park, Sarah Spackman's studio is a haven of tranquillity. Light slants in through big windows that look across a pretty stream into the park. Pinned to the walls are sketches of park life, along with still life paintings and oil sketches from a recent visit to Scotland. The studio is a generous space, with a high ceiling and plenty of room for the storage and display of her work.

Sarah counts herself as lucky to have one of the five studios that make up the Edith Road Workshops, a former punt builders' workshop that has been a creative hub in Oxford for 25 years. The large, whitewashed fireplace that dominates her studio was reputedly used for forging rowlocks – the braces that hold the oars of rowing boats. Under Sarah's guardianship it has since become a space for storing the many pots and vases she uses in her still life paintings. The long windowsill performs a similar function; a table below it is laid out with a few pots, ready for her next composition.

"I paint a lot of still lifes," she says. "Basically I paint about space – space around groups of things, spaces in between things. The reason I'm interested in parks at the moment is because they're examples of outside space that have been enclosed and organised. Whatever my subject matter, space and how things sit in it is the underlying concern."

A lifelong artist, Sarah trained at the Byam Shaw School of Art before gaining a degree in fine art from Camberwell College of Arts. She went on to live and work in Italy and Yorkshire, before finally moving to

Oxford to be near friends and family. She has lived in the area for more than 20 years, but took on her Edith Road studio just two years ago.

"Before this studio, I had a studio in Kirtlington, which was fantastic but it was an hour on the bike. Two winters ago, I was preparing for a show and found that I couldn't work in the studio – it was too cold. Then I got a phone call asking whether I would be interested

in renting this studio and I said yes very quickly. I like that it's quiet but you've still got company – there's a weaver, Valerie, who owns the studios, and there's also a jeweller, a furniture restorer, and a printmaker and painter."

While her studio is vital to her work, Sarah also spends large amounts of time sketching and painting outdoors. "I begin with looking – I spend hours walking and cycling, and then I take a small sketchbook and do preparatory pieces, looking and drawing. I also take out little boards for oil sketches, and quite often I work on the final pictures outside – if the weather permits it!"

If the weather has other ideas, or if she wants to complete a piece using mixed media which would be too bulky to carry, she works in the studio using sketches and her memory to create an interpretation of what she has experienced. The desks running along one wall of the studio are used for watercolour and mixed media painting, although quite often she will use the floor for this too. Near the window, two easels are set up for oil paintings and a palette is laid out ready to start work. "I always have the palette laid out the same way, and I always use artists' oil colours because they've got much more pigment in them than the cheaper paint," she says.

A shelf near the sink stores further tools of her trade, including rabbit skin glue and Titanium White, which she uses to prime her own home-made canvases. "I use linen, to which I apply two coats of size and then six layers of primer which I mix myself. It gives it a slight tooth. Manufactured canvases are so slimy. I don't like them – I prefer the feel of homemade ones."

If she gets stuck or needs a break from her work, she turns to her collection of art books, which fill shelves at both ends of the room. "If there's something I'm trying to work out, then I might go and look at some other paintings and try to work out how somebody else has done it."

Also important is the music of Handel, Mozart and Bach, which she often puts on the stereo while she works. At the end of the day, however, she likes to play the music herself. "I play the guitar a bit," she says. "It's a good way of finishing the day and switching off before going home." ■