



## seeing past Lanyon

ONCE UPON A TIME, DAPHNE MCCLURE WAS INHIBITED BY CORNWALL'S ARTISTIC HERITAGE. NOW, SHE'S PART OF IT

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman/www.ocean-image.com**

“It was in Porthleven that I really started painting. But it didn't happen as soon as I moved there. For a while, I couldn't see past Peter Lanyon's iconic image of the place. I love it, but couldn't get it out of my mind.”

Daphne McClure's recollection of a form of artist's block will be familiar to many artists in Cornwall. As she says, “It is difficult to paint in Cornwall. So much of the county is so paintable, and has already been painted.” The sense of Cornwall's rich and powerful artistic heritage being a weight, rather than an inspiration, is often mentioned by artists, and for Daphne, Lanyon's famous 1951 painting of Porthleven occluded her development until she was presented with an unexpected view of the venerable fishing port.

“I was frustrated, because I couldn't free myself of the Lanyon painting, so I returned to screen printing fabrics and sold scarves and smocks at Trelowarren,” she recalls. “I also opened a junk shop at the back of my house. With the proceeds I took a cruise up the Baltic to St Petersburg and when I returned a friend, David Edwards, who was Air Commander at Culdrose, gave me an aerial view of Porthleven. It changed my life, for there it all was – the great harbour shape cutting out the skyline.” Daphne did not look back: “I then painted Porthleven for nearly ten years.”

Painting in series has since been a leitmotif for Daphne. She went on to paint the Hayle Estuary, Godvrey Lighthouse, St Ives and Levant Mine, saying that she enjoyed the latter “immensely. No sea or blues, just siennas, pinks, browns and lots of old gantries.” The Levant Mine series was exhibited at the Jonathan Clarke Gallery in London in 1994, arranged by Wilson Stephens Fine Art; the following year, Daphne was commissioned by the Tate Gallery in St Ives to design a piece of work to exhibit for its inaugural exhibition.

Daphne's move to Porthleven came in the mid-seventies, but she was neither a Cornish ingénue nor, indeed, a newcomer to the art world. Born and bred in Heltson, her love affair with painting began as a child. “I suffered from bad asthma while growing up and was often absent from school,” she says, in authoritative yet mellifluous tones. “But whenever I was at home, my mother always made sure I had a supply of crayons and paints. I drew and painted all the time.” →

## ART

Having attended the West Cornwall School in Penzance, Daphne's next stop was Redruth Art School. She studied under a tutor whom she still refers to as 'Mr Hamley', a man who had a lasting influence: "He was a lovely man, and told me to try for art school in London." Her evident talent, combined with Mr Hamley's encouragement, led to a place at the Hornsey School of Art. "I had three wonderful years there, studying all forms of art on a foundation course," she says.

So, too, did Daphne throw herself into London's cultural life. While completing a further course – in lithography and textile design – at the Central School of Art and Design, she would often take herself to ballet and opera performances at The Royal Opera House. On one occasion she noticed, in the programme credits, that part of the production department was run by two girls who dyed and painted the costumes. "I thought to myself: 'I could do that', and wrote a letter asking if there were any vacancies. The answer came back pretty quickly – it was a 'no' – but six weeks later I was contacted again. This time there was a job." And so the next stage of Daphne's journey was as a costume designer – for £10 a week – at the Royal Opera House. "It was a wonderful experience," she says. "Working on the costumes, under famous designers such as Leslie Hurry [The Ring, 1954] and John Piper [The Magic Flute in 1956] taught me how to carry colour in my eye."

During this period Daphne worked extensively with the Batik method, a medium which continued to absorb her following marriage in 1956 (to George, a dentist) and the couple's move to Oxford. Two children followed – Emma, now also a highly regarded artist, and Tom, who went on to become a Newlyn fisherman. Daphne had exhibitions at the Playhouse Theatre in Oxford but, with two young children, was unable to devote herself to art as much as she would have liked. Then, though, came her return to Cornwall, with the family settling in Porthleven in 1976, a few miles from her childhood home.

If Lanyon's remarkable, experiential take on Porthleven prevented Daphne from immediately engaging with art again, she soon found her feet. She went on to become one of Cornwall's most respected artists, no doubt because her extraordinarily keen sense of colour, allied with a nuanced,

sensitive feel for design and balance. She credits the German-born American artist Josef Albers with instilling a fidelity to the latter, which was further honed after a residency at the Josef and Ani Albers Foundation in Connecticut. "This came about a few years ago, after I'd had an exhibition in 2004 with the Archeus Gallery in London. This was seen by Nicholas Foxwebber, the director of the Foundation, who then offered me a residency. Of course I accepted the opportunity: my daughter Emma and I travelled across the Atlantic on the Queen Mary, arriving in New York in 2005. We had a fantastic time. The studios were wonderful, set in 75 acres of woodland and lakes. The Foundation had a superb library and Albers' painting 'Homage to the Square' looked beautiful in the gallery. I became more aware of his theories on basic design and balance and I even used his architect's table."

Daphne also acknowledges the influence of Christopher Wood and Jack Pender, while among more contemporary painters, she is an admirer of Jeremy Le Grice, Paul Armitage and Romi Behrens; in her hallway, indeed, hangs a painting of her son Tom by Behrens. But in all of Daphne's work her own, unique stamp is present. This is so in paintings of an overtly Cornish nature, with their lighthouses, chapels, churches and fields (not to mention tractors), but also in Daphne's energetic and experimental plastic bag constructions. This sees her stitching together numbers of plastic bags to make what might be an endless scarf, or a curtain, by way of a comment on the excess and waste of modern life.

One of Daphne's uncles was Leonard Treloar, a wrestler who, she says, was known as 'the Cornish crusher'. There is something in the connection, for Daphne, whose forthcoming solo show at Cornwall Contemporary marks 35 years since her return to Cornwall, is at once gentle and strong, modest and passionate, deeply aware of her county's artistic legacy and yet always ready to give her own, subtle interpretation of landscape and emotion: every inch, you might say, a Cornish artist as venerable as the ancient port of Porthleven, a place which both constrained her and, ultimately, set her free.

**Daphne McClure shows at Cornwall Contemporary in Penzance from March 25 to April 18. See [www.cornwallcontemporary.com](http://www.cornwallcontemporary.com), Tel 01736 874749.**

