



Above: Camber Sands. Middle: Barley Lane. Right: Fairlight



No place like home

BY GARETH STEVENS

Emily Allchurch's upcoming show, *'Closer to Home'*, is a tenderly crafted love letter to the East Sussex countryside and the antecedent artists who have shared her preoccupation with landscape. I was so lucky to be able to view Allchurch's works prior to the exhibition's hanging and was so impressed with not only her technical skill and the sheer amount of time needed to 'construct' each piece, but also by the ideas that underpin the work. Allchurch relocated to Hastings seven years ago, and like many, relished the move. She has since flung herself into her new environment - running, walking and swimming in the countryside around her Old Town home.

She has exhibited extensively in many countries and her work is held in numerous permanent collections internationally

including Japan, Hong Kong, the USA, Monaco and Canada. Surprisingly she initially focussed on sculpture before beginning to shift towards photography during her MA at The Royal College of Art.

Through necessity, this current exhibition marks a new direction for the artist. The Covid pandemic curtailed several international projects, but it is worth looking at previous work in order to fully appreciate *'Closer to Home'*.

Allchurch enjoys a firm and longstanding relationship with Karin Weber Gallery in Hong Kong. In the Autumn of 2020 the gallery hosted an exhibition called *'Mirrored Cities'*. Inspired by the work of Gentile Bellini, his scholar Vittorio Carpaccio and Chinese court paintings of the Song dynasty.

Allchurch visited Venice and travelled extensively in mainland China. "I feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to travel so extensively during 2019. It has been a wonderfully restorative process to be able to work every day during the UK lockdown with the over 40,000 images I took on my trips," she says. The resulting show explored topics such as

globalisation, mass tourism and trade. Rather than contrasting East and West, it searched for harmony and similarities, by combining fragments of photographs from both locations. The work implicitly explores the historical significance of the Silk Road and the travels of Marco Polo.

Fast forward to the lockdown and the impossibility of international travel. During this time Allchurch began to take photographs on her daily walks. These culminated in a monthly exploration of seasonal change and the featured body of work.

Although arguably more provincial than previous work,

artist Hiroshige and despite having transcribed particular paintings from the past in many of her previous works, this exhibition's twelve images do not reference particular master works explicitly. Having said that, May - Fairlight recalls Holman Hunt's painting *Our English Coasts (Strayed Sheep)* and one can't help but be reminded of Eric Ravilious when you happen upon *August - Beachy Head*.

Multi-layered both technically and thematically, each of the works in the exhibition are painstakingly assembled from hundreds of photographs. So complete and balanced are the finished works,

of ideas she intends to express. Each work is assembled 'brick by brick' over months. That each piece is infused with such breathtaking aesthetic beauty despite her meticulous attention to detail is astounding.

At first glance you could be forgiven for being overwhelmed just by the formal exquisiteness of each piece. However, look more closely and, whether it is the half buried Corona beer bottle in *December - Camber Sands*, the grubby discarded mattress in *March - Spring Estate* or the out-of-context traffic cone in *January - Brede Valley*, it becomes clear that Allchurch isn't solely preoccupied with rendering a pastoral idyll. She doesn't 'airbrush' out rogue elements in order to make these scenes look untouched; rather she is keen to juxtapose nature with our clumsy ways of interacting with it. Furthermore, the recurring inclusion of signage refers to the way our experiences of the places depicted are manicured and curated.

Some of the larger pieces are presented with their own bespoke lightbox. This lends a staged theatricality to the work, intensifies the colours and ultimately is an open admission to the artifice of all art works.

I strongly encourage you to see these hugely creative works. It is extraordinary to see such accomplishment in a small local gallery.

■ *'Closer to Home'* 11 February to 18 March at Lucy Bell Gallery. www.lucy-bell.com

“Like an architect designing a huge building, she solves a myriad of technical challenges along the way without losing sight of the weave of ideas she intends to express.”

'Closer to Home' is no less sophisticated or challenging. Understandably there is a sense that Allchurch has stripped back her process and has focussed on more local themes - I think that this is authentically analogous with all our lived experiences during the time of Covid restrictions. This makes the work honest and relatable.

Although the work pays a deep homage to the work of the Japanese

that the way they were formed is somewhat obscured. As in the work of the master painters she so reveres, the 'brushwork' - the very means by which the pictures are made - is invisible.

Allchurch courts complexity and enjoys the arduous journey to each piece's completion. Like an architect designing a huge building, she solves a myriad of technical challenges along the way without losing sight of the weave