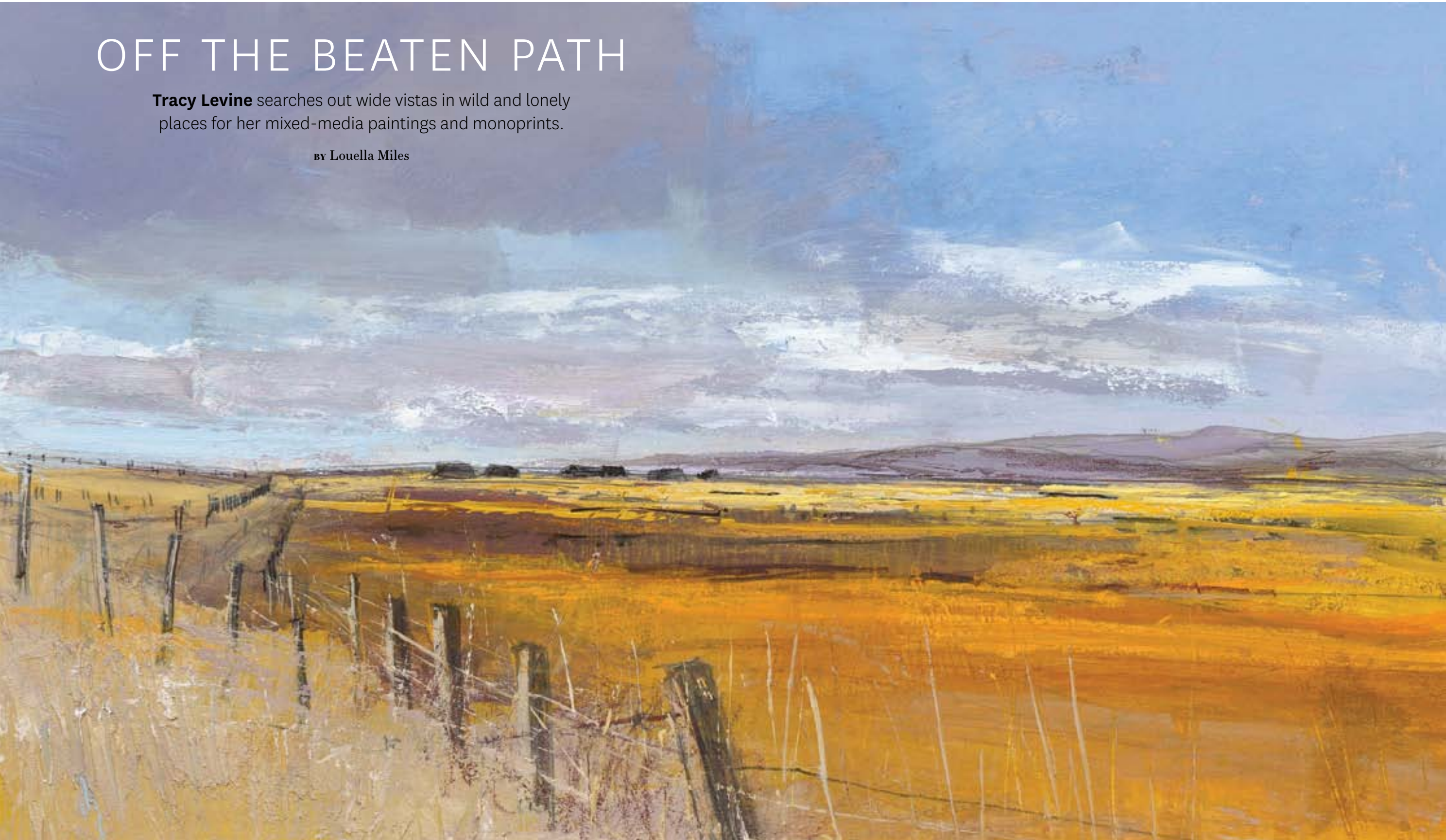


OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Tracy Levine searches out wide vistas in wild and lonely places for her mixed-media paintings and monoprints.

by Louella Miles



FROM TOP
Pink Rocks, Iona
acrylic and mixed
media on *xsurface*,
XXXXX

**Swaledale, Above
Reeth**
acrylic and mixed
media on *xsurface*,
8 2/3 x 12 3/8



British landscape artist Tracy Levine remembers when, at the age of 5, she made a pretend gallery with sheets and chairs in her father's lounge. Aided and abetted by her younger brother, she pinned their drawings up, pricing them between one and two pence, and agonizing over which ones could command a higher sum. Her father was not amused. He didn't approve of his daughter going to neighbors to ask whether they'd like to visit and buy some paintings.

"What's funny is that it doesn't feel that much different from what I do now, except for inflation, of course,

because my prices are a lot more than one pence," she says with a laugh.

WINDING CAREER ROAD

Early proclivities notwithstanding, Levine's artistic path between age 5 and the present took a few detours. After finishing sixth form (the British equivalent to completing high school in the U.S.), where Levine excelled at art, she left home to study for a mathematics (maths) degree at the University of Reading. "I didn't even realize that I could do an art degree until I saw art students at 'Uni,' and that's when I realized where I wanted to be," she says. "So, after a year of maths, I came back and did a foundation course



at Blackpool, a degree in fine art in Newcastle and then postgrad studies back in Lancashire."

At the end of her studies, Levine was painting, although not full time. "I actually set up a business dealing in 20th-century decorative arts and became a specialist in Clarice Cliff ceramics," she says. "And I taught in college alongside that."

The ceramics business came about by accident. Levine had priced a Clarice Cliff plate of her grandmother's at 50 pence (less than a U.S. dollar) for a car-trunk sale. She then decided she rather liked the plate and preferred to keep it—and discovered that it was worth a few hundred pounds (or dollars).

Finding that she had a passion for antiques and decorative arts, Levine began traveling to specialist fairs around England while teaching art part time at a UK college level. She also painted whenever she could. The nudge to paint full time came about 14 years ago when Levine moved to South Cumbria and set up her

first studio. The location inspired her. People immediately liked—and bought—her work.

INTO THE WILD

At this point, things took off quickly for Levine, but she's not given to the myth of overnight success. She believes that an artist should learn the traditional uses of a medium before he or she begins breaking the rules and using it in different ways. She progressed from childhood crayons to watercolors to oils. Then, in post-university days, she discovered an affinity for mixed media. She now finds that using a variety of media gives her more scope for exploring and mark-making.

As for influences, one predominant name is that of the British artist Joan Eardley (1921–63), whose work Levine considers "brilliant." Also, although the focus of Levine's degree work was on semi-abstract figures in emotionally expressive environments, the artist admits to being influenced by the German Expressionists. These days Levine

eschews figures but retains her interest in the evocation of emotion.

"I'm mostly attracted to the wild, raw, unspoiled qualities of landscape—the wilder the better," she says. "That's why I particularly like Scotland. But I'm also looking for beauty where it's not immediately obvious: for example, a clump of weeds or wildflowers by the side of the road. But color is what I'm really drawn to. I'm always looking for some special colors, color combinations and just a flash of color, a line of color."

This leads Levine to seek big skies and uninterrupted views. A favorite site is a beach on Iona—a Scottish island less than three miles long (see *Pink Rocks, Iona*; above and *One House, Iona*; page 44). There's a particular beach there that she visits annually. "Every year when I first arrive on that beach, I find it incredibly emotional," she says. "It's just overwhelmingly beautiful and spiritual. I could, I think, live on that beach and paint that same view over and over for the rest of my life, and I wouldn't tire of it."



Levine appreciates the way light and colors differ from one country—or one county—to another. She feels fortunate to be able to explore Cumbria's Lake District and easily travel north to Scotland. "Sometimes," she says, "I can drive from Cumbria to Yorkshire, and just going over the county border, I notice the difference. The difference overseas is even more dramatic."

SITE AND STUDIO STRATEGIES

Levine paints in all weathers—rain or shine. If it's really rainy, she keeps her materials in her car and positions her easel just outside its shelter. She also has a trailer that she can load with her kit, attach to her bicycle and, in more inhospitable terrain, haul on foot. This is key because she doesn't travel light.

What does she bring with her? "Well," says Levine, "besides easel, board, paper and canvases, I've got oils, acrylics, water-based media, a drawing kit, inks, crayons,

ABOVE
Buttercups and Daisies 3
acrylic and mixed media on [xsurfacex](#), 35% \times 35% $\frac{3}{4}$

OPPOSITE
Cove With Summer Weeds, Silverdale
acrylic and mixed media on [xsurfacex](#), 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ \times 23 $\frac{3}{4}$



DREAM STUDIO

Levine's ability to capture the essence of a place has become easier since she moved into a new studio. The opportunity came about virtually by accident. She and her partner had developed their previous space from an old garage, which was cramped, damp and lacking in storage. Their house was bursting at the seams, and the two were planning to move when a chance conversation with the vicar, whose yard adjoined theirs, led Levine to ask him whether the church would sell off a bit of land.

After a year of price negotiations and conveyancing, Levine owned a parcel of land and was able to sit down with her interior-designer son to plan her dream studio/gallery. "It has beautiful natural and artificial light, adequate storage and room to breathe and create—a dream come true," says Levine.



pastels and collage stuff. I sometimes collage in proper gold leaf so I need all the brushes and water containers. And of course, extra clothing."

Her varied materials contribute to a textured effect that's highly effective, bringing color to her work plus a sense of movement—not to mention atmosphere, that's uniquely hers. She paints en plein air for days or even weeks, producing both small and large works, and then takes them back to her studio where she'll build on them, enlarge them and, sometimes, move on to monoprinting.

"There seems to be a very specific length of time you can keep all [the on-site experience] in your head and keep the connection going," says Levine. "I usually find that after about six weeks, it's gone. But I do also use photographs as an aide-memoir and take hundreds of shots just to make sure I've got everything. So I don't tend to sketch, as such, but my small paintings sort of serve that purpose."

Levine prefers pre-primed linen rather than canvas—or heavyweight (610–620 gsm, or about 300-lb.) Fabriano paper—surfaces tough enough to handle mixed media and survive inclement weather.

She might begin a work with soft pastel, graphite powder or charcoal before introducing paint. At other times she'll begin with paint, and other media will come along at a later stage. It's very much an organic process, influenced by her surroundings and the topic. "Sometimes the surroundings are even embedded into my work—from when it's flown off the easel into the sand," says Levine. "Or, on occasion, I might find bits of leaves, gravel and stick in there."

Levine doesn't generally have more than one painting going on at a time. "If you do, it gets a bit complicated," she says. "You're trying to remember how you mixed colors, and I mix thousands in the course of one painting, so I don't want to forget them. I also work very quickly so, as a rule, I can keep going and get the work finished."

There are exceptions to the rule, though: Levine is currently working on two big paintings. "I don't know why," she says, "but I was equally

interested in both, and just wanted to get them both going simultaneously.” Also, if she feels she’s becoming frustrated with a painting, she might put it away and return to it later. “If it’s been away for long enough,” she explains, “you’re then more detached and can see it with fresh eyes. Those frustrations may not even be there anymore, or you may look at it and think, *Well, it’s fine, it’s fine as it is.*”

MOVE TO MONOPRINT

In recent years, Levine has also been concentrating on monoprinting,

the printmaking technique that she feels is most closely related to painting and drawing (see *Orange and Blue Beck* and *One House, Iona*; both opposite). Monoprinting involves drawing or painting on a glass or metal printing plate and then pressing that plate onto a printing surface to create a reversed printed image. Levine, who has developed her technique over the years through personal work and teaching, builds an image in layers. “I may paint on the glass, put my paper on it, take a print from it and then repeat the process, adding different colors at different stages. Essentially, you use printing inks rather than paint to create more varied marks than can be achieved with paint and brushes. You paint every mark by hand and end up with one-off prints.”

Although Levine has a printing press, she tends to print by hand, enjoying the enhanced control this method offers.

OPPOSITE TOP
Orange and Blue Beck
monoprint; ink on paper, XXXXX

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
One House, Iona
monoprint; ink on paper, XXXXX

BELOW
Looking From Longridge
acrylic and mixed media on xsurface, XXXXX



“I’M MOSTLY ATTRACTED TO THE WILD, RAW, UNSPOILT QUALITIES OF LANDSCAPE—THE WILDER THE BETTER.”

—TRACY LEVINE



She works on a few versions at a time because any one can go wrong easily at any stage. “You can suddenly get a big black splodge where you didn’t want one,” she says, “or you might think, *Hmm, that blue might be nice if I changed it to purple.*”

Her monoprints and paintings tend to capture the essence of a place rather than offer a realistic photographic representation. What she’s trying to do, she says, is to enhance the viewers’ perceptions. “I want people to look at a landscape in a new way or to look at it more deeply. I try to reveal things or colors that people don’t necessarily notice. I’m observing a landscape all the time. I feel I’m a professional observer, and most people won’t be looking and seeing what I see.”

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▶ VISIT THE ARTIST’S WEBSITE AT TRACYLEVINE.CO.UK.