

TALKING TECHNIQUES with **ALEX FOWLER**

Elected to the New English Art Club aged 29, this talented young painter combines his classical training with an experimental eye for new subjects, as **Steve Pill** discovers



TOP RIGHT Alex in his London studio
BELOW *Lemon No.1*, oil on canvas, 23x20cm

PAGE 39 *Mission Street, San Francisco*, oil on canvas, 92x117cm
OPPOSITE PAGE *Camellia*, oil on canvas, 101x76cm

Alex Fowler's studio is a bit of a mess. Large paintings are stacked precariously by the doorway, smaller studies dot the walls and countless art books bulge out of the makeshift shelving units. Making your way from one side of the studio to the other involves tackling a veritable assault course of carrier bags, canvases and picture frames. Every available surface is covered with bottles, jugs and vases, all potential subjects for his next still life painting.

Sharing the studio with a second artist – award-winning plein air painter Adebajji Alade – does perhaps account for the sheer quantity of clutter on display, but you can't help

thinking that it would look fairly similar if the space was entirely his own.

Yet in a haphazard sort of way, this busy West London workspace also explains a lot about the way in which this talented young artist comes up with the paintings that he does. Because whether he is working on a foreign landscape, a figurative nude or one of the aforementioned still life compositions, Alex is interested not so much in the subject itself but rather how he experiences it and translates that experience into oil paint.

The hustle and bustle of the studio makes sense when you consider that he is constantly on the look out for, and fascinated by, unusual perspectives on everyday things.

As you move through this maze of art materials, easels and objects, new juxtapositions of colour, shape and form present themselves at every turn. Add in to this the changing patterns of light and shade provided by the various skylights, spotlights and windows, and it is a wonder that his studio buddy needs to head out in search of inspiration.

The artist really began to develop these interests over the past five years as he sought to eradicate some of the hard edges within his paintings and become more playful with his subjects. "I got really interested in the idea of perception," says the 38-year-old. "How does our eye scan a space? What does it land on? When you are painting one particular moment in a subject, we have this tendency to telescope in on it and actually that is mostly not how we experience being in the world. We do if we are trying to spot someone walking down the street from a distance, for example, but mostly we are not so aware of looking and I've tried to get that experience into my painting."

The two canvases on the easels in Alex's studio highlight these concerns. One is a newly-finished painting of three bottles, rendered at awkward, apparently incorrect angles. "I wanted to recreate the experience of looking at something out of the corner of your eye, hence this experience of it being tipped," he explains, pointing out that the colour play between the bottles and the light falling on the shelf behind them inspired one of the more abstract areas of the painting.

The contrast between this passage and the small, sharp square of green at the centre of the painting is the key, he believes, to catching the viewer's eye and creating the desired effect. "Sometimes you have to lie to tell a different truth," as he puts it.

"I'm pursuing something similar in this painting here," he adds, gesturing towards the second, more complex



PHOTO: STEVE PILL



ABOVE *Greenwich Street, San Francisco*, oil on canvas, 116x147cm

still life arrangement on the other easel. "I feel like tipping the picture plane or having an unusual angle is a great way of waking up the mind."

"Maybe because I've worn glasses since I was five, I've always had the choice between having 20/20 vision and rather blurred vision, so that's another thing that made me really interested in the nature of how we see. I'm fascinated by the times when our brain doesn't quite make sense of what we can see."

When it comes to actually beginning a larger still life painting, Alex will play

around with the composition first – the one constant being that all of these items are chipped, stained or dusty. "There's a lot of beauty in an eroded, weathered surface. It allows the eye to travel across the surface in a way which is quite abstract."

With an arrangement settled upon, he will often begin with a simple line drawing. "From the drawing, I found the angle and the proportions," he says of his initial study for *Three Bottles*. "Drawing something out of the corner of one's eye was quite a new idea to take on, so it was

important to pierce the white of the paper and get into the painting."

From here, Alex will start colour blocking. Interestingly, given the very precise angles and lines in his finished paintings, he actually scrubs in the colour quite roughly, leaving plenty of space between the different colours so that he has room to refine the shapes as he progresses.

Alex credits much of his success to a two-year diploma in portrait painting at the Heatherley School of Art. "I really fell in love with painting from observation in general and the rigour

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that was brought to the table by a lot of the staff there, many of whom who had been trained at the Slade by Euan Uglow and Patrick George.

"It's direct painting," he explains. "You observe a colour, you put it down, then you observe the adjacent colour and put it down next to it. I really liked that nuts-and-bolts approach. It's a brilliant way to study as well because you can't hide behind snazzy brushstrokes or theory."

The latter comment is telling, given that the artist first endured a rather unfulfilling foundation course that prized theory over techniques. "I went to these lectures that were opaque and impenetrable, full of art jargon and nonsense," he says. "I found it rather depressing because I thought, 'It must be me, I must be stupid.'"

The colour mixing stage is as an important one for Alex. Working with Michael Harding oils, he uses a palette knife to mix up large, flat slabs of pigment – "I like to see the clarity in the colour". He is an advocate of the Heatherley's approach to mixing all colours from just six pigments – a warm and cool variant of each of the three primaries – but he does have a slightly different way of looking at them. "I could not for the life of me tell whether Cerulean Blue or Ultramarine Blue is warmer or cooler," he says. "For me, they're both cool colours! I think of it instead as a blue that is biased towards red and a blue that is biased towards green."

Unlike many oil painters, Alex works on a bright white ground so that the white shows through the thinner layers of paint and adds luminosity to his colours. "Sometimes it does mean putting on thick washes to block out the white, but it's much easier to tone down a colour than it is to brighten it."

At the time of our visit, Alex is in the finishing pieces for *Still Alive*, a group show by members of the Federation of British Artists (he qualifies as one of the youngest members of the New English Art Club). After this, he wants



to clear some time to develop a few ideas and see where they take him.

In the meantime, he is still buzzing off a recent visit to The National Gallery's *Veronese* exhibition. "One of the magical things about painting is you can look at a painting made in 1620 and you're looking at it in 2014 and it is as present and impressive today as it was back then."

With his inventive approach to classical techniques, there is every chance that Alex's own works will be delighting audiences for years to come. www.alexanderfowler.co.uk

ABOVE Alex relaxes in front of his *Three Bottles* painting



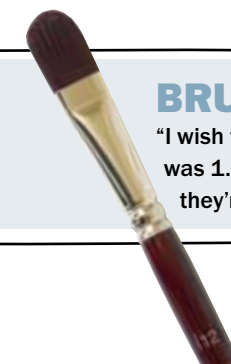
VERONESE

Alex was "bowled over" by the Renaissance artist's early works in the National Gallery's recent show.



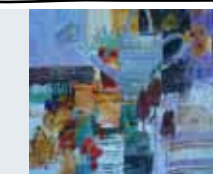
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Alex mixes seven parts turps to one part stand oil. "If I want a good range in my darks, I might use more oil."



BRUSH ENVY

"I wish they made a larger filbert that was 1.5" wide," says Alex. "Maybe they're out there somewhere?"



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other leading artists feature alongside Alex in *Still Alive* at London's Mall Galleries from 5-23 August.