



# *in search* OF LIGHT

RAME ARTIST TERESA WICKSTEED HAS HARNESSSED A LIFE AND DEATH EXPERIENCE TO GREAT EFFECT

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman**/[www.ocean-image.com](http://www.ocean-image.com)

**T**he landscape undulates on the Rame Peninsula in a way that is quite unlike the rest of Cornwall. I've been to this part of the county before, but as I drive along Military Road, above Whitsand Bay, I'm struck afresh by its sinuous, sweeping contours. The place seems possessed more of the gentility of the Cotswolds, or West Devon's rolling hills, than the often harsh terrain of Cornwall. And once inside Teresa's Wicksteed's studio, tucked away next to Polhawn Fort on Rame Head, this thoughtful, sensitive artist corroborates my sense of things.

"Everything is curves here," says Teresa. "The land, the roads, even the sea and the weather. It's impossible not to be influenced by the landscape. I'm always thinking about it."

Teresa's studio is in an enviable location. It's next to what has to be one of the most romantic wedding venues in Britain – Polhawn Fort – and has glorious views over Whitsand Bay and the soft cambers of Rame. No wonder that inside, Teresa creates work of a strikingly meditative nature, replete with swirling, parabolic lines and yet exuding quietude as much as energy. But if the landscape around her plays an important part in her work, more formative was a near-death experience when Teresa gave birth to Rose, her first child. ➤





"I was very ill," says Teresa. "I had a severe haemorrhage, lost an awful lot of blood and was in intensive care." For three days, Teresa was critically ill. She spent a total of three weeks in hospital, though ultimately recovered well. But as she says: "Things like that can't help but change your perspective on things. I felt as if I'd been given a second chance."

Many changes ensued in the years following the birth of Rose. Teresa and her husband John, then a building contractor, moved from London to Cornwall. Their second child, Bernard, had just been born – happily without incident – and the couple bought Polhawn Fort, a remarkable dwelling by any criteria. The fort was completed in 1867 and was then known as Polhawn Battery. Its purpose, as one of a number of Plymouth defences variously known as Napoleonic Forts or Palmerston's Follies, was to prevent Napoleon making land along Whitsand Bay.

"We didn't really know what to do with it," says Teresa, who didn't move to Cornwall as an artist. Granted, she had always loved painting, but having completed a degree in English literature at Leeds University she had worked as a teacher, in both primary schools and higher education. But after settling in Cornwall, Teresa began to paint again. Gradually, a commitment to art crystallised – and so, too, did a use for Polhawn Fort.

"For the past 16 years, the fort has been used as a wedding venue," explains Teresa. "Initially we also used it for conferences and holiday bookings, but the focus soon became wholly on

weddings. Now we're fully booked for at least a year in advance."

The family moved into a house next door, whose design John had a hand in, and Teresa embarked upon a two-year Foundation Course in art at Saltash College, which was administered by Falmouth College of Art. This helped consolidate her move into art. "It was a breakthrough for me," says Teresa. "It was hugely rewarding and it changed my attitude to everything." She went on to complete a BA Hons in fine art at University College Falmouth, after which her path was clear – to work as an artist.

Also clear from the outset was Teresa's artistic direction: she would work as an abstract artist. "My paintings don't have a narrative or a story; they're not descriptive," she says. "Words have nothing to do with them. When I'm painting, I think in terms of feelings, feelings which are connected to images and colours."

Using oils on canvas, Teresa's layered paintings take time, but their reflective, considered process mirrors the importance of meditation in her life. "I meditate daily, and my work is fuelled by this as much as it is by the natural energy of the landscape around me." As befits a graduate of English Literature, Teresa is highly articulate when it comes to explaining the genesis of her work: "Each painting is a palimpsest of experience; once the making has begun, the work takes on its own life. By slow accretion, the painting embodies the narrative of its own making. It is a process






of concealment and revelation. I work in series; I am in a constant dialogue with each painting, and the paintings are in dialogue with each other. This conversation is always surprising me with its new and exciting moments, and I try to transmit transformation and moments 'out of time'. I want to show unseen energies; the immaterial, rather than material world. I am always attempting to make visible the invisible: this has been my passion since what happened when Rose was born, which has remained in my mind ever since."

Key painterly influences are Mark Rothko, Bridget Riley and Ian McKeever. Rothko, says Teresa, "made me realise how powerful abstract painting can be", while Riley's abstract forms and colours "capture the essence of energies of the natural world". Given that her work is so much about light and optimism, it is tempting to conclude that McKeever looms largest, not least when Teresa describes McKeever as "always capturing light – his work is a spiritual quest to find more light".

Teresa's own quest has led to her work being exhibited in a variety of places, from an NHS psychiatric unit in Bodmin to the Bowie Gallery in Totnes, Devon, via other hosts such as the World's End Gallery in Chelsea, London, the Artmill Gallery in Plymouth and Stuart House in Liskeard. For many years Teresa has also played a leading role in the Tamar Valley's annual Drawn to the Valley event; this year, in May, she will participate for the first time in Cornwall's Open Studios.

A decade on since she first committed to life as an artist,

Teresa's career is blooming. "2012 was a good year," she says. "Ten of my paintings were selected from a national open submission for two shows in The Ark Medical Conference Centre in Basingstoke, and five pieces were selected for the Signposts exhibition at Plymouth University." Many of her works are to be found in therapeutic locations, including osteopathy and acupuncture practices, a yoga teaching room and two hospices, thereby continuing something of a theme – the sale of her first large work, from her 2002 degree show, was to a consultant psychiatrist.

I've spent a couple of hours chatting in Teresa's studio. It's time to go, and as I do so one painting in particular catches my eye. It's called 'Flow 4', and Teresa has been working on it for a long time. "It never seems to be resolved. For me it's like looking through a window, seeing two worlds collide and separate again. It has a bit of turbulence too." Deep, intense blues make Flow 4 a departure from Teresa's usual palette, which is quieter and more restrained. But in all of her work, there is a sense of vibrancy, of spirit, of energy – and of life. Teresa Wicksteed may have undergone a life and death experience, but she has harnessed it to great artistic effect. 

See Teresa Wicksteed's work at [www.teresawicksteed.co.uk](http://www.teresawicksteed.co.uk)  
From 25 May, Teresa will open her studio doors as part of Cornwall Open Studios.

For more information on Polhawn Fort, see [www.polhawnfort.com](http://www.polhawnfort.com)