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YOU'RE THE GIRL FOR ME

When we spoke, Rose Wylie had just celebrated her 90th birthday. She had also just appeared in the recently-launched Loewe campaign, photographed in her studio in Kent. Needless to say, she is booked and busy.

FEATURE *by* GRACE SANDLES

ROSE WYLIE



Portrait: Rose Wylie
in her studio, June 2023
Photo: Will Grundy

Courtesy the artist and
David Zwirner © Rose Wylie



ROSE WYLIE
Ballet Backdrop, 2024
 oil on canvas in four parts
 366 x 304 cm (overall)

Courtesy the artist
 and David Zwirner
 © Rose Wylie

"I don't have a theme. Something arrives from somewhere ... I see it. If it's really, really visually exciting, well, I get excited." That's how Rose Wylie describes the conception of her paintings: organic, disparate, responsive. "It can be a bird outside the window or somebody's hat. The way somebody's mouth slips when they smile. Smiles are interesting, and teeth."

Wylie, 90 years old and living and working in the same charming house in Kent – the Garden of England – that she has for over half a century, paints on unprimed, unstretched canvases. An avid consumer of media, any media, what she sees around her is what she grants immortality on those raw, charismatic canvases. She was a prolific reader of the classics – Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Proust, Coleridge (the title of her last solo show with David Zwirner references *On Poesy or Art*, from 1818) – in her years off painting while raising the children she shares with her (then) more prominent painter husband Roy Oxlade. She admits that she still watches a lot of films. She loves art and ancient history. She paints by observing her surroundings. Everything makes it in – high and low, near and far, often all at once.

She calls her approach trans-temporality. "I like antiquity that looks like now," says Wylie. It is not trans-historical because it is more a melting together of time, we agree, and it is not atemporal either, because it feels more akin to travelling across than sitting outside of. Plus, it's got good rhythm and lots of syllables, which suits Wylie, who uses a lot of canvases. "And then '-ality' gives it a bit of status."

There's a triptych upstairs she's referring to as her *Classical Painting*. "Well, it started off as one [canvas] and then it grew to two and then to three. The first one [came about when] I got up in the morning and there was a nice, very pale, yellowy green dish with a white middle on the table, and on the dish were two purple plums and a bit of twig. For days I looked at these plums and thought how good they looked, so I decided to paint them. It's a very traditional subject to paint, fruit on a plate, but I didn't want it to look like a Cézanne. Then as I looked, it became connected to

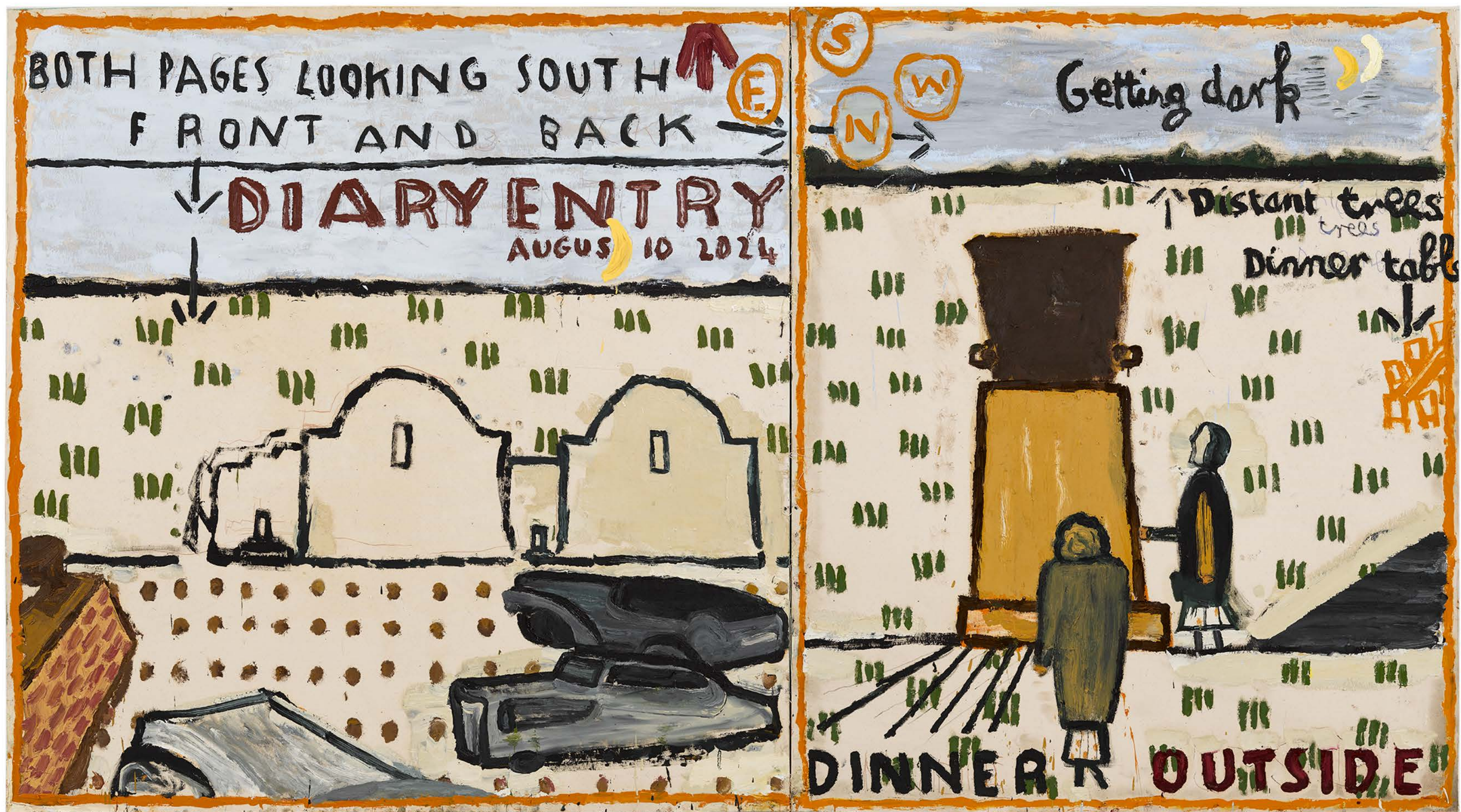
the wall paintings in Pompeii. So anyway, it grew. I put a big column in between the two paintings, and I did the dish again to get the green. And I've also been looking at the Roman catacombs – I love wall paintings, so I put a girl in on the end (a life drawing I'd done earlier) and curved parallel lines."

Currently facing that painting in the studio "is a painting of a dinner I went to in a house up the road," Wylie tells me. "It's quite big, 12 foot across. And the dinner was outside so the painting has got cars in front and a house, and people and stuff. And then I did a smaller painting, six foot, of just two figures, which were drawings made as studies for the bigger one." She continues, "I'd been looking at a recently discovered carving in an Egyptian temple. Then I was looking at the legs on my painting – I'd finished it – and I went back, I started messing about, breaking into the legs, repainting them, and then I found they'd got too realistic and it was wrong. They were better before. So, I scraped it all off with my palette knife, I repainted the background colour and I put them back again as before. I don't like feeling that there is something I ought to or might have done. I want to be in control of the painting. I don't want it to dominate me. So, the legs are now exactly as they were before."

These two paintings will appear in her upcoming solo show at David Zwirner London, along with others created in the six months or "maybe a year" leading up to it. There will be cohesion, of course. "It's my aesthetic interests [at the time] that connect [the works], rather than the subject," she clarifies. They might well end up in a subsequent solo exhibition at Zentrum Paul Klee, too.

That's the thing about Rose Wylie. She's got a wry humour, a sparkling wit and a disarming way of talking. What's ahead for the next decade? "Hoping for the best." What's she watching at the moment? "A lot of Thomas Hardy" – but, oddly, not painting it. What's blooming in her magical, oft-photographed garden in Kent? "It's full of fallen leaves. They're all over the floor of the garden." (That one I should have anticipated; I forgot to factor in the Northern Hemisphere of it all.)

"I'M ALWAYS INCLINED TO WORK ON A BIG PIECE OF UNSTRETCHED CANVAS. I DON'T LIKE CONSTRAINT. I LIKE BEING ABLE TO EXPAND. I DON'T WANT TO BE STUCK WITH A SIZE BEFORE I START; I LIKE TO ADD TO IT."



ROSE WYLIE
Dinner Outside, 2024
 oil on canvas, diptych
 183 x 328 cm (overall)

Courtesy the artist
 and David Zwirner
 © Rose Wylie



Thoughts on Germaine Greer? “I loved her arriving on my doorstep early one morning.”

Wylie has a “weedy memory ... it’s never been red hot,” so she likes to make notes and mnemonics. Often, that’s how text ends up in her paintings. We lightly acknowledge medieval illuminated manuscripts and I think passingly of William Blake, for whom text and painting were two halves of a whole practice. She asks if I know the *Babar the Elephant* book series. I do, and now I feel silly for thinking of Blake first, somehow. Text plays

a subsidiary role in her imagery, both fragmentary and complementary, but its very presence owes a lot, perhaps, to the “illustrated texts” she grew up with in those elephant books.

First studying at Folkestone and Dover School of Art, and then later the Royal College of Art in London, Wylie’s CV is pedigreed. Yet her figuration is fresh. It might have something to do with the roughly 18-year break she took from painting while raising her children.

“The thing is, you come back to it with renewed interest because you haven’t been doing it,” she notes. “When I came back to painting, there was this traditional idea that men paint, and they paint on an easel. And I really didn’t want that. So, I started cutting up canvases and I worked on the floor because this seemed like it was different somehow from easel painting, which I didn’t want to have anything to do with. I’m always inclined to work on a big piece of unstretched canvas. I don’t like constraint. I like being able to expand. I don’t want to be stuck with a size before I start; I like to add to it.”

She likens her approach to Michelangelo’s on the Sistine Chapel, which she’s recently been watching a television program about. “It’s pretty big, but in fact what [Michelangelo] did was to brilliantly divide the ceiling up

Top to bottom
ROSE WYLIE
Lilith and Gucci Boy, 2024
oil on canvas, diptych
207 x 306 cm (overall)

ROSE WYLIE
Singing Life Model, 2017
oil on canvas
169 x 182 cm

Opposite
Portrait: Rose Wylie,
Autre magazine,
Sittingbourne, 2024
Photo: Juergen Teller

Courtesy the artist
and David Zwirner
© Rose Wylie





into several smaller pictures with lines in between. That's the way to do it – what a triumph. It's no bigger in a sense, in a very big sense, than what I do, in that I do a lot of paintings on canvas-coloured background and I could stack them up endlessly and put them together across a vast surface ... but mine of course aren't painted on a ceiling!"

Wylie's studio is an excavatable site, a veritable archaeological treasure bearing the evidence of a prolific vocation. "There's nothing in it that isn't related to painting. There's no junk in it ... It's all an extension of painting," she says, laughingly suggesting that I might have seen pictures before, without even a hint of defensiveness. "The thing is, I don't clear up. I paint late at night and then suddenly get to a point when I can leave the painting, just leave it, shut the door,

Above
ROSE WYLIE
*Lolita's House and
Two Cars, 2018*
oil on canvas in
two parts
183 x 335 cm

Opposite
ROSE WYLIE
HAND, Drawing as Central, 2022
oil on canvas; triptych
185 x 403.5 cm (overall)

Courtesy the artist
and David Zwirner
© Rose Wylie

and then the next morning get on with it. So, I don't clear up in between sessions. And I'm often painting all the time. Because I work with wet, thick paint, you have to wipe your brushes on paper each time you go back to the wet paint. I just use it until it piles up, and then after a certain amount of time, I clear it up."

At the end of our interview, my late evening and her crisp winter morning, I am resolutely in agreement with Germaine Greer's assessment of Wylie. I fire off a text message to a friend and colleague. "Rose Wylie might truly be the coolest person ever." **V**

Rose Wylie. Flick and Float will show at Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland from July 19 to October 5, 2025.

Rose Wylie: When Found becomes Given will be on view at David Zwirner London from April 3 to May 23, 2025.

Rose Wylie is represented by David Zwirner, London.
davidzwirner.com

