

BEST *in* SHOW

What do a knitting machine, Princess Diana and a years-long series of dog paintings have in common? Sally Muir's surprising story reveals the power of sticking to your process and having a bit of fun with your art.

BY Ani Kodjabasheva



British artist Sally Muir's art-making journey is one that involves many auspicious encounters. In her 20s, she happened to come upon a knitting machine for sale in Camden Lock, a neighborhood in London located on a former wharf on the Thames. "I think the machine cost five pounds or so—incredibly cheap—so I bought it. It was a really noisy, very old knitting machine," she says. She used it to make scarves "just for fun." Muir had always enjoyed knitting, and even knit her own clothes as a teen, including a full-length rainbow-colored coat. "They were terrible hippie clothes, really," she says. The knitting machine was all part of the natural progression of this interest.

FROM MARKET STALL TO ART MUSEUM

It was Muir's brother who introduced her to Joanna Osborne. Knowing that both women owned knitting machines, he thought they should meet. They did and immediately began making plans. "We got very enthusiastic that night and decided we would start a business," Muir says.

LEFT
Rosendo
oil on paper,
16½x11½

OPPOSITE
Hound
oil on board
9½x7½



The next day, she gave her notice at the bookshop where she'd been working and set out to launch a knitwear business. Muir and Osborne's knitwear brand found a home in a market stall at Covent Garden Market in London. It was the late 1970s, before the area started to get spruced up. "It was sort of manky and hippie in those days," Muir says.

Not long after the business began, Princess Diana was photographed wearing one of the knitting duo's sweaters featuring a now iconic design—a repeating white sheep pattern with one standout black sheep at the front. Their brand-new knitwear brand became instantaneously famous. The business received substantial

media coverage and started exporting their wares to department stores in the U.S. and around the world. The black sheep jumper has since been immortalized in the collection of London's Victoria & Albert Museum, one of the world's foremost museums of applied art and design.

FROM ENTREPRENEUR TO ARTIST

By the late 90s, Muir had moved to the city of Bath, in Southwest England, and was spending less time on the knitwear business. She'd always wanted to go to art school but felt she'd missed her chance. She'd enjoyed drawing since childhood and had been using her drafting skills to

design knitwear. Now, the time had come when she wanted to explore art further. So, while taking care of her small children, Muir enrolled part-time at a local school of art and design. She expected to master drawing and painting techniques, but was surprised to find that the biggest lesson she learned was about "defending your decisions" as an artist.

Early on, a trusted instructor told her not to try to please the faculty but to simply do what she wanted to do. "That's very good advice," Muir says, although it wasn't easy for her, as most of her tutors weren't especially supportive of what she was doing at the time. She wanted to paint her children "over and over again," she says, and her work was less conceptual than what her tutors were hoping to see.

Overall, though, Muir is grateful for the learning experiences she had in school—lessons that helped her develop confidence in her art. The time also provided her the opportunity to establish a daily practice. In retrospect, she appreciates the fact that she didn't study much technique as she has found it rewarding to make discoveries for herself.

LET THE MATERIALS BE YOUR GUIDE

Muir continually tries out new tools, techniques and media in her work. She has developed a recipe, for instance, for making her own charcoal. She wraps a few willow twigs in five layers of aluminum foil and puts them in the embers of a fire as it's dying down at the end of an evening. "It smells delicious," she says. "Unlike the store-bought kind, this charcoal also has a bit of bark left, which makes it quite scratchy." It creates an effect that the artist enjoys, as she likes a bit of unpredictability in her art materials.

Another trick she uses is to burn a twig to charcoal on one end. She then ties the other end to a much longer stick, which creates a tool that allows for a more gestural mode of drawing. Muir uses these long charcoal sticks to draw on very large surfaces, such as the paper used for her towering piece, *Grace* (above left).



LEFT
Mothscape
pastel on paper,
7¼x11½

OPPOSITE
Grace
charcoal on paper,
65x44½

At nearly 5½-feet tall, it's a larger-than-life depiction of an alert, poised greyhound. The artist puts her whole body into making a piece this large, drawing with more sweeping and less controlled movements.

Muir also makes her own quill pens. "We've got countryside at the end of our road," she says, so it's not unusual to come across large bird feathers. She sharpens the ends of the quills and uses them to draw with ink. "These homemade quills are prone to doing their own thing," she says, but she enjoys imparting this improvisational quality to the drawing.

Recently, Muir found a new way to paint with pastel. "I've just discovered that you can wet pastels, which turns the sticks into a gouache-like material. It's amazing," she says. "And then, if you draw back into them while wet, the pastel becomes a completely different texture."

Often it's the unique quality of the material that inspires a painting and determines the way it will take shape. Her small, dreamlike painting, *Mothscape* (above), for example, began with the image of a moth inspired by Mary Oliver's poem, "Sleeping in the Forest." The connection was textual. "Pastels are very like moths in the way that moths are sort of dry



TOOLS + MATERIALS

Among my favorite materials are a big box of Rembrandt pastels—a great present from a friend. In addition, I have several boxes of Unison pastels, which I separate into color families, and a small collection of handmade pastels made by the owner of Bristol Fine Art, a local art materials shop. Also pictured on my desk is my box of Kuretake Gansai Tambi Japanese watercolors. I especially like the large-sized pans, as I like to use big brushes. I use Derwent watercolor pencils as well as a lot of inks, which I apply with brushes and handmade quill pens. I love Fabriano paper and use it for most of my works in pastel. I also enjoy working on packaging materials, such as brown paper and cardboard, and even make a lot of drawings and prints on tissue paper. —Sally Muir



and powdery,” Muir says. She had no particular composition in mind when she started the work. “I was just playing around with black color,” she says, “and then I thought, ‘I think it needs some big moths.’” She applied wet and then dry pastel to create the imagined, abstracted landscape in which white lines dart over black charcoal and green and white pastel washes to evoke the movement of the insects in a dusky, lush forest.

GOOD THINGS COME IN SERIES

Mothscape offers a glimpse of Muir’s creative process—how she tends to create her paintings freely, without a plan, by trusting her media and her intuition. To be able to do this consistently, she finds working in series helpful. “I like trying out different things—doing an ink one day, a potato print another day, or a wire pencil,” she says. After one piece is



OPPOSITE TOP
Lily
pastel on brown
paper, 25½x31½

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Naked Dog
oil on board,
23⅜x23⅜

THIS PAGE
Dino
charcoal and pastel
on paper, 30x22

"I live a slightly dog-obsessed way of life."

done, the next one begins as another "blank slate."

"I can only do things really quickly," Muir says. "I think you can completely ruin things by overworking them." She feels her best art happens when she's present in the moment—not thinking back or planning ahead.

Paradoxically perhaps, this desire to work quickly and directly has led the artist to multiple year-long projects with daily works centered around a theme. *Mothscape*, for example,

was done as part of an online poetry group in which members regularly respond to a poem with art. Such ongoing projects allow Muir to experiment with her art and materials without being overly worried about the end result. "If one piece isn't a success, there's always going to be another one the next day," she says.

THE DAILY DOG

Muir's most enduring and celebrated series has been her portraits of dogs.

Dogs became Muir's top subject soon after art school, replacing the portraits of her children as her main occupation. Although she enjoyed depicting her own children, she wasn't as confident in her portrayals of other people's children. "Dogs are definitely easier," she says, "or maybe I'm just better at them." She soon started receiving more and more requests for dog portraits and, in addition to these commissioned works, she also used the subject in her personal art, working from life, photos and her imagination. These efforts eventually grew into her "Dog a Day" project, which she launched, in 2013, on social media.

Muir has now published two books of dog paintings and drawings: *A Dog a Day*, containing the 365 images originally posted on social media, and the newly published *Old Dogs*, a follow-up collection of portraits, inspired by her 15-year-old whippet, Lily. In the eponymous pastel and chalk drawing (page 40), we can see Lily sprawled diagonally across the sheet of paper, her figure as delicate and graceful as a Degas ballerina, only in repose. The drawing is done over a different sketch of Lily in profile, showing the stretch of time the artist and subject have shared while making the piece.

The diversity and range of artwork in the prodigious dog series demonstrates Muir's joy in playing with her media and facing her subject anew each time. In *Naked Dog* (page 40), the tiny white figure takes up a fraction of the picture plane and looks all the more endearing for its vulnerability. *Dino* (page 41), on the other hand, stretches across the 30-inch sheet of paper, on spindly legs, poised like an edifice. These two pieces also offer another contrast. In some works, Muir opts for a bold, flat background to set off a dog's form. In others, the subject stands on its own against the blank sheet.

Muir often chooses to use pastel in combination with charcoal—as in *Sidney* (left)—or with another medium to achieve the effect she's after.



ABOVE
Charity oil on paper,
14½x9¾

OPPOSITE
Sidney
charcoal and pastel
on paper, 16½x11½

Other times, pastel alone is all that's needed to capture the appearance of, say, fuzzy, disheveled fur. In other works, she may keep the paper but pick up a brush and oil paint, as in *Charity* (above), in which the dog's facial expression becomes the central attraction. Each subject has its own stature and pose, bringing a unique mood to each piece.

Endlessly fascinated by dogs and the people who love them, the artist is never looking to create perfection in her portraits but rather to capture—quite often with some humor—the essence of the dog, its personality and the experience of being in a dog's presence.

LEARNING BY DOING

Based on her experience as an entrepreneur first and then as an independent creator, Muir has some advice for aspiring artists: "I'd say, just do your art all the time. As much as you can, try to do it every day. Just keep at it."

The artist is a proponent of quantity and advises artists to worry less about quality. That will naturally follow. It's an



MEET THE ARTIST

English artist Sally Muir is based in Bath. She has had dogs all her life, and has enjoyed drawing and painting them for as long as she can remember. The artist started posting daily dog paintings on social media, which eventually led to the book, *A Dog A Day* (Harper Design, 2019), featuring 365 of her canine artworks. Her follow-up book, *Old Dogs* (Pavilion Books), was just released this year. Although best known for her dog portraits, she also paints people and landscapes, as well as the occasional rodent and bird. Muir's work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and is represented by Cricket Fine Art, in London.

attitude that grows out of her experience with the knitwear brand: "Maybe it's from having had a business, where we just started it and learned as we went along," she says. "We didn't have a business plan. It's much more about learning as you do it."

With this in mind, Muir shows up each day, open to more auspicious encounters in art-making and to spending more time with dogs. 🐾

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▶ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST, VISIT SALLYMUIR.CO.UK