

Backstory

Jean Cooke RA's 'Ungardening' paintings

Painting the wildness of nature in the midst of her domestic garden, the artist made works that revealed her freedom of spirit, writes *Alexandra Harris*

'I am at present finishing a painting of summer herbage with various sons and myself,' Jean Cooke told a correspondent in 1968. She was in the midst of a masterpiece. *Toujours en Fête* (1969; above right) bursts with energy, celebrating a profusion of flowers and grasses in a cliff-top meadow garden. The sense of wildness is inseparable from the picture's consummate artistry. The composition is elaborate, bizarre, wholly original. Each figure is in a world apart. A baby is cocooned in a Moses basket that makes a big satisfying lozenge shape in the foreground. One boy reads among the buttercups; another is restlessly alert. The artist in the background raises her brush-hand to bring it all into hard-won coherence: herbage, various sons, and herself.

For 50 years, Jean Cooke painted people, plants, gardens and seascapes in startling ways that were not like anybody else's. She once described her effort to forget things when she went to bed and start the next day with nothing in mind: she wanted to begin looking again. Her pictures still give the shock of familiar things freshly seen.

She was married for two decades to the painter John Bratby RA, who assumed himself to be the more important artist of the two and exerted control by allowing Cooke just a few hours a day to work. He painted her as a hunched figure at the kitchen table, surrounded by tins and cereal boxes. In response, Cooke began a long series of self-portraits that portrayed the woman she felt herself to be: forcefully resilient, concentrating intently, determined to work.

Above: *Toujours en Fête*, 1969, by Jean Cooke RA

Right: *Hortus Siccus*, 1967, by Cooke



In the background of these portraits there is often a bright glimpse of leaf or blossom; branches tap at windows or let themselves in. The big garden of the family house in Blackheath, south London, was a source of deep pleasure. It extended its encouragingly unruly branches into Cooke's indoor life, and whenever she could she set up her easel outside. It's a superb idea for the Garden

Museum in London to focus a new exhibition on the distinctive vision she pursued among the nasturtiums and forsythias, whose abundant energy she had no interest in taming.

In *Who's Who* Cooke listed gardening as a hobby, and in subsequent years changed that to 'ungardening' (to which she added 'talking, shouting, walking along the beach'). It's a word that will appeal to contemporary

audiences interested in giving nature more license in their gardens, turning lawn to meadow, welcoming wildlife. Long before rewilding, Cooke was ungardening. The verb is an active one: she was not letting everything entirely alone, though visitors might have been forgiven for thinking so as the old tennis court and disused swimming pool disappeared into undergrowth and grasses grew as high as the children who ran through them.

Hortus Siccus, or ‘dry garden’, from 1967 studies seedheads from the Blackheath plot with great delicacy and none of the stilled atmosphere that often characterises flower paintings (page 24). Stalks are brushed in with a rapid, skating calligraphy. Gone-over sunflowers, alliums and loosestrife nod in an immersive mobile world. Adventuring through depths of straw and umber, a child appears repeatedly as if on safari (‘Jason’s there, and he’s there and he’s there’). The picture forms a pair with *Toujours en Fête*: autumn and summer growths. Both are a generous five-foot square. Both involve intricate studies collaged or, in Cooke’s word, ‘welded’ together to make a whole with a life of its own.

After her separation from Bratby in 1973, Cooke rented a house right on the edge of the cliffs at Birling Gap in Sussex. The cliff and the seaweed-strewn foreshore became alternative gardens, unmown, unbounded, where she could pull a wicker chair into the wind and paint. But always she returned to London.

She didn’t want to miss the cherry blossom, or the flowering of the magnolia – which she suddenly thought one day looked like lots of falling wings; she called one of her glowing magnolia pictures *The Birth of Icarus* (1998). Her garden was full of upward flight. From the 1990s she had a flock of doves nesting in an upstairs loo with the window ajar; white wings emerged from this domestic dovecot onto cherry boughs which she painted in arching silhouette across large canvases. Jean Cooke’s life was not always a party, *toujours en fête*, but her garden was endlessly surprising and she found in it a model of freedom.

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● **Jean Cooke: Ungardening** Garden Museum, London, 21 June–10 Sep



Insight

How does the RA judge art by children?

Assessing works from the thousands of entries for the Young Artists’ Summer Show was a profound experience, this year’s primary panel tell *Louise Benson*

What links a ceramic sculpture of a crocodile in a bread bun (title: *Hot Croc*), a coloured pencil drawing of a tomato locked in jail, and a digital sketch of a cat wearing a large pair of sunglasses? Welcome to the dizzyingly playful world of the Royal Academy’s Young Artists’ Summer Show, a free open-submission exhibition for students aged 4–19 in the UK. Now in its fifth year, the exhibition receives more submissions than the Summer Exhibition, with this year’s cohort chosen from more than 21,000 entries. Approximately 250 artworks are displayed in a free physical exhibition in the RA’s Clore Learning Centre, and hung by the same technicians who handle masterpieces by the likes of Matisse and Gainsborough. These works will also appear in an online exhibition along with approximately 250 additional works.

There are two judging panels comprised of artists and curators, one for primary schools students, the other for secondary. Each panel spends a day together on site at the Royal Academy reviewing digital images of the submissions. The young artists can submit works in any medium, from collage to found objects, video to textiles. When I meet the three judges of this year’s primary

school panel, who assess the work of children as young as four and up to the age of eleven, they explain that the experience has been as rewarding as it has been challenging.

‘The works have got the full range of emotion,’ says Sarah Lea, RA exhibitions curator. ‘They are filled with real humour, and the certain things that the children observe in the world, and the way that they express themselves.’ Mary Stephenson, a final-year student at the RA Schools, adds: ‘Some of them are using art to grapple with very difficult experiences. We’ve got works depicting families who have been directly affected by the war in Ukraine, as well as others expressing the experience of migration from other countries.’ ‘But then,’ painter Mali Morris RA points out with a smile, ‘there is also just the day-to-day joy of everyday life, and the things that feature prominently in a child’s life, whether that be food, domestic life, pets or toys.’

What are they looking for from the submissions? ‘Originality, creativity and skill,’ they agree. Each work is submitted with an accompanying explanatory statement, ranging from a single word to a more detailed description (these are later printed in the free exhibition catalogue and online). ‘They’re



Previous page:
Tomato in Jail by Masha, aged 7, at the
 Young Artists' Summer Show 2023

This page, clockwise from left:
 Three views of *Hot Croc*
 by Isaac, aged 11;
I don't want by Nico, aged 7;
Welcome by Rafaella, aged 10;
Glasses by Jasmin, aged 10



funny and poignant,' Lea says. 'They offer the firsthand experience of these young people, which is very powerful.' A pencil drawing titled *Gymy Pigs* is accompanied by the following statement: 'These are my guinea pigs Louis and Lou. I love imagining them working out at the gym.'

There is frequent uplifting laughter and shouts of delight from the judges as they alight upon each new creation, and Morris quotes the artist Terry Frost RA, who would check if an artwork gave him 'a tickle' as a measure of its greatness. One text-based artwork by Nico, aged 7, reads in bold lettering, 'I don't want to enter the Royal Academy art competition' (above). The accompanying statement reads: 'This is how I felt when I was asked to do the submission for the art competition. But then I realised I did want to do it. Art is fun when you put your mind to it.' The judges are unanimous: 'A straight yes from us.'

Other works engage with contemporary politics, as seen through the eyes of a child – a reminder of how current affairs and the domestic sphere collide in often surprising and emotional ways. A wooden door has been painted with the names of the prime ministers who have been in office during the child's lifetime, measured alongside the height of the young artist as they grew up. There are five in total, a remarkable record of unprecedented political change. 'It's quite profound,' Stephenson says. A pencil drawing titled *Welcome* (left) shows a child encountering a policeman on the beach. 'The UK government is trying to make it illegal for refugees to come to this country and will arrest them as soon as

they arrive,' writes ten-year-old Rafaella, 'but these are real people with feelings, hopes and dreams and that's what this work is about.'

'It's a place for children to address and explore these feelings, and it can be very moving,' Lea explains, before pausing. 'But of course, you also have lots of pictures of cats, and that's just as important.' A number of works have taken inspiration from Royal Academicians, including Lubaina Himid and Frank Bowling, in paintings that fizz with colour and life, with one series inspired by Himid that the entrant painted on the interior of wooden drawers.

The show offers a springboard to the young artists, giving them a professional platform to experience what it means to exhibit publicly. 'They are the next generation of artists, and the next generation of Academicians,' says Lea. 'It's important for us as an institution and educational establishment to celebrate that.'

The judges also reflect on what they themselves have learned from being immersed in the minds of these children for the day. 'It reminds you of the open-ended nature of art making and world building, and the possibilities of mark making,' Stephenson says. 'The works transport you and that's really inspiring.' As Lea concludes, 'We can't wait for the public to come and see them, and to share in that sense of delight.'

Louise Benson is Director of Digital at Art Review
● Young Artists' Summer Show
 Clore Learning Centre, Royal Academy of Arts,
 and online at roy.ac/youngartists, 18 July–13 Aug.
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