Ruth Philo
Interviews Sue Kennington

RP: Hello Sue, lovely to be talking with you today about your painting and practice. Can you tell me a bit about where you're based?

SK: I live in an ex-farmhouse, in the middle of Italy, 30 miles outside of Siena. It's the wildest place, its completely abandoned all around us, it's kind of romantic but a bit worrying when we get very hot summers with the risk of fires. Coming from London originally, I thought it would be wonderful living in nature, very other, and indeed it is very other, but it's also very difficult. It has upsides and downsides. I find it quite amusing looking at all this art now about nature, it's very on trend now. People have this idea 'ah nature' but nature is a bastard! I crossed the Sahara twice when I was about 20 - that's nature! I nearly died! So, I have got this slightly odd angle on nature and I'm with my husband, here in the forest.

RP: We got to know each other online in 2013-14 and I curated the show *Lines for Agnes* that you were in in 2015, then you were working between both London and Italy.

SK: Yes. During Covid we couldn't move, lockdown was very restricted, we weren't allowed out of the house, I couldn't even go to our local village. That went on, on and off for about 1 ½ - 2 years. I also have a studio in Rome but couldn't go there then. We became quite settled in this place. My recent solo show in Rome is very related to my experience in the lockdown period and the sense of the unknown, thinking 'are we all going to die,' what is going to happen?

RP: Is that the time that you became full time in Italy?

SK: Yes that had already started, it was getting less and less London and more and more Italy. Now I think we're going to start to creep back to London a bit. We'll see what happens

RP: It sounds then as if nature perhaps took over your work in lockdown?

SK: Well not in any conscious way, certainly, the work has always been about the light. Light generally falls on things and nature and because I was surrounded by this jungle, it started to emerge in my paintings. Even during the day, one wasn't allowed out, so with my partner, we started going nightwalking, doing night walks together.

RP: So is that how your work got darker, because you were out at night?

SK: Yes, I can see it now, but it wasn't remotely conscious, because I don't have that sort of brain. If I think, 'I know that's a good idea, I'll do that …', I would immediately screw it up, I just can't work like that.

RP: I think it's great when it comes out unconsciously, it seems to have a bigger force somehow, in that you're not in charge of it are you?

SK: No not at all. I'm not, I'd like to be but I'm not. I mean I wouldn't really like to be probably now, although I would have once.

RP: Tell me a bit about how your work has developed over time?

SK: Yes, it's almost like I've gone back. I finished my MA at Goldsmiths College in 2002, I took two years out. I did a whole bunch of work for them that would satisfy them, but it didn't satisfy me. It was a priori, you had to think it out and know what you were doing. It was the opposite of anything I'd been doing, because my work was all about not thinking about what you were doing and somehow reaching this other plane if you were lucky. After that I went through many ways of working, there was a whole geometric series, you know that from the *Lines for Agnes* show. It's always been about colour, colour has been the thing since the very beginning but in different ways. I don't know whether you ever saw my earlier work, I had two paintings in the *New Contemporaries* show in 1996/7 in the Tate in Liverpool. They were very gestural and working against my taste, but I see them as an energy display now. Really the motivation was the colour always, this kind of atmosphere if you want, it's not really the right word, but there is this very specific thing that doesn't have a name that I was trying to show. I remember saying that even way back in college at Chelsea, and being really annoyed because I couldn't find an appropriate way to communicate it. Ever since that period the work has gone through all kinds of different permutations. I think now, really for the last 4-5 years it has found its form, I'm quite satisfied with the way I'm working, though obviously I feel I could do so much more, like we all do all the time, but I feel that the nuts and bolts of it are there.

RP: Yes, you have kind of found your style, and your way of expressing yourself, it's very personal and easily recognisable.

SK: It's interesting to hear that, that you think they're distinctive because I don't see that. There was a curator for the last show, he had his own vision, so I thought, OK I'm not going to get involved with the hang. It was interesting to see what his ideas for the show were, and it was very good for me to see this.

RP: So, I'd like to go back a bit - I think you did a degree in humanities before you came to art, does that feature in your work at all?

SK: I did it because I wanted to work in the theatre. I went to school partly in Jersey, in the Channel Islands and if you did drama, you couldn't get grant. So, I found this course which was all drama but was called humanities. It was at Middlesex Poly. I read a lot, Beckett, Swift, philosophy, a lot of great things. It certainly wasn't planned. I wanted to be an actress, but I was hopeless. I had to do a director's workshop and I won and realized then that I was looking, rather than trying to be. That was the beginning of the looking thing and deciding yes/no. I was doing lighting, stage management and assistant director. I loved what you can do with lighting.

RP: Yes, and I feel that your paintings have that, that sense of light and drama, that might connect with your experience of the theatre - the curtains and the way you can have dark against dark with the light, especially the night paintings.

SK: Yes, that's an interesting observation I hadn't thought of the connection, its fantastic what you can do with lighting.

RP: I also noticed that you didn't go to do your degree until after your father died and wondered if that was a connection there?

SK: Yes, that was because I come from a family of artists that go back to at least 1600, Two quite recent members were famous. My father was an artist, although he didn't realise this, he used to draw but was formally an engineer. I was quite good at art at school, when I was about six, I used to draw all the time, then I became aware that I was from a family of artists and it stopped me dead. I was a girl and at the time girls weren't expected to do much, they got married mainly. I thought I couldn't do art, it must have been some problem about not feeling good enough. I stopped and really didn't start again until after my father died. When he was ill, I was with him for about six months and as he became sicker, I didn't know what to do, I just sat with him and looked at him and so I started drawing him. Then I was hooked. I'd put my design business on hold and after he died, I immediately dumped it, and started to study art.

RP: They can be very meaningful - drawings at the end of life.

SK: Absolutely, that's how I started.

RP: It was quite a pivotal moment then. Tell me about the artists in your family who were famous?

SK: Eric Kennington my great uncle, he has work in Tate and Imperial War Museum, he was an artist in both wars and knew everyone like Sickert and GB Shaw. His dad was TB, Thomas Benjamin Kennington, a Victorian painter who painted the downtrodden working classes in London, he also painted portraits of various dignitaries to earn a living. He came from Grimsby originally. I'm lucky enough to have some of his paintings here, he's very good, they're gorgeous paintings that I can't stop looking at. He also did some very beautiful paintings of women, nudes in the forest.

RP: I wonder now if we can talk a bit about the painting in the Priseman Seabrook collection *Amnesia*. I was thinking it feels quite theatrical, so strangely links with the ideas of the theatre that we have been talking about. It also has a sense of both absence and presence in it.

SK: Yes, I can see now that it is concerned with the same issues that I am still working with. That was just an exploratory painting. I'd been working with very high colour for a very long time and not really understanding why I couldn't get the kind of thing I was wanting to get with this intense colour. This was one of the first paintings that didn't have that, it was almost monochrome.

RP: Was this then a transitional work? I remember your work from that time was much more geometric, though not entirely, with soft triangles and something of the hand or the haptic present. This part on the left is quite mysterious with translucency and opacity in the paint - veils. Gesture is really beginning to come through on the right-hand side. It makes me think of a kind of curtain, a veil or unveiling.

SK: It was always all there that stuff, I was known for those early paintings with gesture - I was trying to work as fast as the synapses, overcome the clunkiness of the material. Really, I was trying to get beyond the conscious, having realised that as soon as my conscious mind got involved it would kill everything. There was a series I did called *Switch*, I would work on little canvases, I'd have so much energy then, I'd stretch up nine of them the night before, then I'd paint them really fast on the floor the next morning, then I would think … that one of them would be 'the one'. Next day I would find that the one that worked would always be the one that I hadn't even considered, or the one that I thought was a total failure - it was invariably like this. They start to die when I try to get too involved in them. So, I was trying to understand the psychology behind them, how some worked and others really didn't. I love Beckett and like Beckett, the writing feels sometimes that it has just fallen on the page, but of course it hasn't its really, really precise. All the effort to be beautiful and meaningful, doesn't do anything, it just kills everything stone dead. So, I'm very interested in that magical situation that can also happen with music when you get some musicians together jamming and it takes off. That's what I'm really interested in.

RP: Is that the creative bit where you get flow, when your mind's not involved, you've left your pre-frontal cortex behind and you're working intuitively?

SK: Yes, it's like when you're dancing and nothing is quite happening and then some certain music comes on and suddenly, you're really dancing and you don't know why. That's the bit that matters. I had a really difficult decade thinking how could I manage this in painting. I have found a way through it, I think, it's a very specific thing, a sort of madness in itself. I wondered how I am ever going to know if the colour is going to work if I have no idea what the colour is. I was very interested in Albers and various other colour obsessives. So, I started to look at the intervals between the colours and I began to make a colour library of my own and I have been doing that for 15 years now. It's a kind of discipline that I do every day, zen, a kind of warming up

RP: It sounds like you're doing the scales, tonal colours as in music.

SK: I realised after about five years that this was slightly odd and I wasn't going to get to any resolution, but luckily before I dumped it, I also realised that you don't have to get everything, it doesn't have to be completely comprehensive. Every time you do it you get a little deeper into it.

RP: Absolutely, it can just relate to that time, just that atmosphere, that moment.

SK: Its extremely mathematical, precise and scientific, it has nothing to do with feeling. I weigh the colours and the colours are worked out in ratios on a spreadsheet, they're complicated. My husband is a mathematician, so he has helped me work out an extraordinary formula on the computer, very enabling, and fascinating - its really rational.

RP: You have the two sides working together - the rational and the intuitive/unconscious, an ideal combination.

SK: Once the colours are interesting and right it takes me a minute to make a painting.

RP: So, you can be quite playful with everything else.

SK: The drama I have now is more about what, if anything? That doesn't last very long as it's sort of referential in a way, but not specific, more about absorbing. I'm very interested in the idea of systems, so I'm using my system, which is esoteric but I'm also able to break out of it. I'm very interested in that dichotomy. The result is still a painting and I carried on painting because it is so interesting, it's easy I just need paint. Unlike the theatre, I didn't want to be restricted by anyone else and their problems, or other components, I wanted it straightforward and unrestricted, like a poet only needing a pencil.

RP: Does walking still play a part in your practice as with your series *Night Walking*?

SK: At the moment I can't go walking because I've got to have a knee replacement. I don't think so, it's all still in my head, so I don't need to walk much.

RP: Thinking about your paintings, I think I read somewhere that the Sienese painters were calling you?

SK: My teacher, Clyde Hopkins, a wonderful guy, said you need to go to Siena, but I wanted to go to New York. I did go to Siena, and I could see why … but then it was difficult because you are surrounded by it. It's the actual place, the light that is dark and golden is very specific. I did a residency in New York in 2014 and I really missed that light. It was difficult in Siena though, partly because of the energy, as there were no painters or artists around here and I felt really isolated,

mainly there were amateur expat painters who started in their 50's and 60's and I felt misunderstood as a painter. It's a very rural community and although I had wonderful friends, they're farmers and don't know much about painting. Although concerning that I did have a wonderful experience, I was doing a project called Hickster Projects for a few years, curating shows of contemporary artists here in a barn in my wilderness, and I was hanging one of the shows and my cleaner and an electrician working on the lighting, both said independently, that they knew nothing about art, but had really responded to the work - a genuine and fresh response, which is really valuable.

RP: Where do you show at the moment?

SK: In Rome, I have a great gallerist there, he gets so enthusiastic and passionate about my work.

RP: So, do you have a painting routine or a daily schedule?

SK: I do! I try and get into the studio by 9.30 am at the latest. I now have air conditioning, before that I would have to get in really early. First I work on my colour work each day for an hour, working on my colour library. Then I have a cup of tea or coffee and then I start painting. Then I collapse on the bed. Finally, I clear up and re-stretch canvases etc, doing something orderly for about an hour, as I hate dirty brushes and I make a real mess, so cleaning up makes it feels good to come to the next day. Bacon's studio was poetically gorgeous, complete chaos, but I would never be able to find anything. Everything is ready so that I can want to return, especially if the previous day had any bad painting. My studio is not very big, but it's very light, with beautiful windows, that shut and open so I can restrict the glare, and just such a wonderful environment. I would love to make much bigger paintings, but I'm really interested in the stuff I'm doing at the moment, they're quite small although they feel quite big.

RP: You also have a studio in Rome as well, so do you work there too?

SK: I did work in Rome. I did a residency at the American Academy there about 5 or 6 years ago and thought I love being in Rome. I previously always had a studio in London, but they doubled the rent around 2016 and I thought I'm not doing this anymore. So, we bought an old workshop place in an area that was a bit rough in Rome, but now it's become very hip. I can stay there. I can work there but it doesn't have windows as its partly underground, so I tend to use that space to show work to curators. It's such a joy to have the work out of all the mess and chaos! I also have shows in there with other people that are fun.

RP: I read 'abstract paintings by Sue Kennington are a deep dive into the communicative powers of colour' … can you tell me a bit about your colour palette? Do you have a particular range of colours that you use?

SK: I tend to reduce it to very specific pigments, because they seem to work better when they have a relationship to each other. For instance, this morning I was working on this piece, the colours are very very close, working with the same components they have a better relationship that way. I do lots of things just to see what happens. At the moment I'm working exclusively with 3 primaries, but they all make what would be considered greys, alizarin crimson, phthalocyanine blue lake and cadmium yellow. I want the poke in the grey. I'm going further and further into these tiny shifts, as this is what I'm really interested in. You have three colours, a cool yellow green, a warm green and a green, and I work with chroma, the kind of brightness and greyness of it and the value, like a Munsell system. These tiny incremental shifts. I'm really interested in people looking at this, though people don't look, but you've got to look!

RP: Do you work in layers?

SK: It just depends, it either works or it's gone too far, yes layers generally. I generally work with a base which is just paint and then riff off of that to produce the light. The actual mark is pretty much this non-thinking thing.

RP: Do you just use brushes or other things?

SK: Sometimes brushes, rags, scrapers. If I were braver and younger, it might have been a bucket. What matters is how it goes on, it is intuitive, subconscious, like Guston says, I have left the room.

RP: Do you work with any medium?

SK: Turps at the moment. I used to work with acrylics. So, when I began with oils I just had this endless problem with oil paint and its stickiness, I just wanted it to be wet and loose and flowy. I tried out lots of mediums but now I use proper turpentine, I mix it up in a food mixer to make it runny - I want it to be able to go on very loosely. I tend to paint flat, normally, but recently I've got more and more into working on the wall, but it can be challenging, if you're trying not to think and you're looking at it, it's quite difficult. I'm quite into that at the moment, like putting salt into something.

RP: Do you have any favorite paint manufacturers?

SK: I started out with Michael Harding, though can be a bit shiny. Williamsburg I love the matte texture. There are so many colours. Blockx are good for earth pigments though I'm not using earths at the moment

RP: Do you work in egg tempera

SK: Sort of, I buy manufactured tempera, Schminke, its very high quality and pigmented. I work on paper on fibre board. I love the dry finish of tempera, it's very quick, I got really into it as a

medium, you can wash it off and its quite resistant and then you can rework it - I enjoy doing those, it's kind of holidays, they're very forgiving and they're so small so you don't have that 'oh my God its a 6ft painting, so come on' feeling.

RP: Do you do diptychs as well as single panels?

SK: Yes, I started doing those with my *Switch* series years and years ago, I used to do whole walls of them. Occasionally, when it happens, I don't plan them as when I plan them, they won't work, sometimes things just do work and they're the same size and the energy runs through from one into the next one, that alters it. Often, they're a flow of colour over another flow of colour, often they're about the light and the intervals between the colours. It sort of punctuates it.

RP: What are you working on at the moment?

SK: I'm working on 4 smallish oil paintings, they're all coming off this very muted, dark base. Recently I've been working off a very bright base so this is working off a muted base so that you're looking at rather than through. It's to do with the light and the landscape. This place has been so abandoned and a lot of it is about my feeling for this landscape. I listen to *Farming Today* on the BBC, most days, here a lot of the farmers have left. We live in a wilderness; we need the farmers. No, not beautiful Tuscany but beautiful people. It is not abandoned everywhere you've got industrial farms as well. It's been a real eye opener to me - that 'selva' – 'wildness' is in the work, and it influences me a lot.

RP: Your paintings are almost like spaces that you can inhabit, in terms of ideas and a sensory sense. So, you can inhabit them and feel the abandonment, or you can inhabit them and feel that things are placed or there is a hand in them.

SK: I think it's really important that there's a sense of possibility in them, not complete abandonment. I want there to be this possibility, that's really important, and that's where the light comes in, even the tiniest glimmer of light at the last moment of the day, or light that can get you out of bed, get you up, make people in terrible circumstances sort of still feel okay, which is really important in the work. If I can't do that I'm stopping! I'm not able to not look at what's really happening, I can't just think it's all pink I'm going to do lovely pink today!

RP: I was just thinking in those dark times of Covid it almost felt that it was in the cracks that the light gets in!

SK: I'm not looking at it, it's looking at me. Everyone has a bit of a struggle, but we manage.

RP: Your paintings have an emotionality in the colour, they're full of feeling.

SK: I expect so, I hope so, it's important to me. I'm not an academic painter at all.

RP: Are there any painters or other genres like films or music that are important to you?

SK: Tarkovski … I came out here because of Tarkovski.

RP: Oh, that's interesting as its the conjuring up of the landscape and also the theatricality of place, not necessarily in a grand way, it could be a haunting way or any kind of way.

SK: Absolutely, I love him. Also, the Italians, Lorenzetti, all these Sienese artists who died in the Plague, they are just masters. I really love looking at Keith Vaughan at the moment. Also, Sol le Witt, Albers, Guston, Bonnard - they all give me something.

RP: I wonder going forwards what plans you have?

SK: Oh, I've got none! I've just had this show, it was great, four writers wrote about it, I sold half the show, everybody loved it, but nothing's happening at all. I'm just going to carry on painting! I should go down to Rome, but I just want to be here at the moment. I'm not very good at pushing or selling myself, I'll drag myself down to Rome in the autumn. I always feel I'm asking curators to come and see the work like I have some dirty habit to reveal. The artworld makes me feel like that.

RP: Is there anything that I've not asked that you'd like to talk about?

SK: Oh my God, you could write a book. There are so many things but no it's a chat isn't it?

RP: Yes, we could have another chat next week and it would be entirely different. I perhaps should have asked you how you make a living?

SK: Ah that's another issue. I don't really make the living I need; I sell paintings but out in Italy its more difficult. During Covid I had three solo shows that were all cancelled, so I just thought, I will have to make work on paper and sell it for £100 on the internet and reduce the price until it sells - down to £1 or 1p. It was fantastic I sold about 100 paintings a year, I put one on the artists support pledge, didn't sell that one, but thought I would just do it myself. Everyone said that's career suicide. Was it, I thought it was quite democratic. Now I mainly live off my husband! I'm not retired! Painters don't really retire, do they? My advice to students has been find someone rich and brilliant to marry, or anything to enable you! I was lucky I found a good one!

RP: It's been fascinating to talk with you about your work, thanks Sue

SK: It's been lovely to talk with you.

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