

Cath Waters

By Michéla
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Cath Waters is a photographer and artist living in central Scotland. If you are a Flickr user and you don't recognise her by name, then it's possible that you may have come across her under her pseudonym, papersnapdragon. I've been enjoying her images for a while, which sit somewhere between landscape photography and digital art. Her mood-filled landscapes marry relatively simple views with textures to create what she refers to as 'digital mixed media collages'. Her textures are derived from a variety of sources – you name it, she has probably tried it. So successful is Cath in creating her own textures that she offers these for sale and runs workshops as well as exhibiting and selling her images at art fairs and through a number of outlets across Scotland.

Until relatively recently your Flickr name was “papersnapdragon” but you now use your own name? Have you found yourself through your art?

I stopped using the “papersnapdragon” user name because I like to use Flickr to post all sorts of stuff, not necessarily work I want to have under the Paper Snapdragon umbrella (having said that, my Flickr stream has been very neglected recently). I wouldn't really say I've found myself through art and in many ways it's been the cause of a bit of an identity crisis as my background is in science. I love what I do though. I get a huge amount of satisfaction both creatively and in terms of being able to build a business that doesn't feel like a job and allows me to work around my three young kids without having to pay silly amounts of money for full time childcare fees.

Would you describe yourself as a photographer or a digital artist? Do you think it matters – e.g. in the way that your images are perceived?

Recently I've been describing myself as a digital artist. It doesn't really matter to me one way or another but I think that to describe myself as a photographer, especially a Scottish Landscape Photographer, brings certain expectations about how my images should look. Without the digital art element, I don't think my photography would be particularly remarkable so to claim I am a photographer in a professional context would be misleading. I also found that the kinds of shops and galleries that stock my work are much less inclined to show any interest if I introduce myself as a photographer! The technique that I use is often referred to as textured photography but I found that to the uninitiated this term was pretty meaningless so I now describe my work as digital collage in which the landscape photography is one element of the collage.



Stac Pollaidh

Can you tell me a little about your education, childhood passions, early exposure to photography and vocation?

I have been around photography from a young age. My Dad is an excellent street photographer and had a dark room set up in our spare room. He has a fabulous collection of black and white shots of semi-derelict Byker in Newcastle that he took in the 70's which the rest of the family are trying to persuade him to exhibit. At secondary school I was always interested in art but I had a brilliant biology teacher who sparked my enthusiasm in science. I did ask a careers advisor how I could combine arts and science but she typed it into her BBC micro and it said I would have to be a landscape gardener! Despite this I continued with art to Higher (Scottish A) level at the expense of physics, and my final modules were landscape painting and photography. I studied Cell Biology and Immunology at uni, and continued with a PhD at Edinburgh Medical School in Cell Pharmacology. During my student days I still painted (really badly) but after my PhD I spent the next 10 years working in science, mainly in cancer research, and while I enjoyed taking snapshots of various travels I didn't seriously take up photography again until my kids came along and I stopped working full time.



Luskentyre Bay, Harris

Tell me why you love landscape photography?

It was painting that drew me to landscapes originally and I think I'm probably trying to use a camera to create what I would paint if I was better at it. There is quite a lot I don't like about landscape photography, I can admire how technically difficult it is but a lot of it seems very formulaic. I don't want to see blazing sunsets with every blade of grass and every rock in uber-sharp definition; it's too much for my eyes! I'd rather get a hint of a place, a glimpse of an atmosphere, and until quite recently when I discovered the work of Chris Friel and others of that impressionist photography genre I had always thought that was outside the remit of photography.



East Lothian Field, Yellow

Which photographers inspire you most? What books stimulated your interest in photography and who drove you forward, directly or indirectly, as you developed?

I think I'm inspired by painters more than photographers but Chris Friel's work has opened my eyes to a whole new world of what can be achieved with a camera. I find his work mesmerising, it's both dark and uplifting and of course, technically brilliant. I also love the work of Valda Bailey, Doug Chinnery and Peter Scammel. Flickr is a great source of inspiration – there are so many great images popping up that inspire me to try new things.

How long have you been creating textured landscapes and how did this start?

I've been doing this for nearly 4 years now and bizarrely it started in the virtual world, "Second Life" where I played around with making artwork combining textures and photography of virtual landscapes. Some of the virtual landscape installations in Second Life appealed to me, especially those made by the avatar "AM Radio" as they were beautifully minimal. Pretty quickly though I decided to move my photography back into the real world, which makes much more sense given that living in Scotland I'm surrounded by some of the best landscapes in the world!



Camusdarach Beach, Arisaig

In most photographers lives there are ‘epiphanic’ moments where things become clear, or new directions are formed. What were your two main moments and how did they change your photography?

I wouldn't say I've had an epiphany of any sort and I'm still on the road to developing a coherent style but there was a moment when I looked back at some of the work I'd been doing and realised that a lot of my images featured horizontal foreground lines and big skies coupled with a bit of tiny detail. There was nothing pre-meditated about this, but now I look for this kind of composition when I'm out with the camera.

Why “snapdragon”?

Because I didn't really think it through! I decided I needed a business name when I first started out selling my work and as I was mainly producing botanical images “Paper Snapdragon” kind of fitted, but now I'm predominantly doing landscapes it doesn't work at all. Sometime soon I'm going to rebrand so I just work under my own name “Cath Waters” but this means redoing my website, all the logos on the back of my greetings cards, trade show displays, business cards, packaging...it's going to be a huge pain and there are always more pressing

things to be doing. Also, for reasons hopefully clear to Mark Zuckerberg, you can't change the name of your facebook business page and I do a lot of promotion through facebook.



Clematis Seeds

Do the landscapes and botanical balance each other or does one outweigh the other?

Landscape work has pretty much taken over now but I still love botanical work. Flowers are much easier in terms of photography (most of it is done on an upturned nappy bucket in my porch!) and much much easier to add texture as more often than not you have a well-defined foreground and background. It's quite satisfying to do too as it tends to work, unlike landscapes which if I'm honest don't work nearly as often!

Could you tell us a little about the cameras and lenses you typically take on a trip and how they affect your photography?

My current (and soon to be upgraded) camera is the brilliant entry level Nikon D3100. Because I'm not overly concerned with capturing tack sharp images I don't really need high end lenses. I use the D3100 18-55mm kit lens with graduated neutral density filters for most of my landscapes. I also have a Tamron 90mm F2.8 which I love for portraits and floral work. My favourite and most enjoyable lens is my lensbaby pro 35mm which produces

lovely out of focus blur that works so well with textures. I've been playing around with using the lensbaby with intentional camera movement but the open aperture of the lensbaby and the longer shutter speeds needed for ICM means you need a hefty ND filter too. Sometimes it works but more often it doesn't.



Portobello Light

What sort of post processing do you undertake on your pictures? Give me an idea of your workflow.

Obviously I do lots of post processing. I start in Lightroom and adjust exposure, white balance, contrast, saturation etc. I also tend to do a preliminary crop at this stage. I'm aiming for bringing out the light and composition rather than getting a perfect stand-alone photo. I then take it into Photoshop as an Adobe RGB tiff. Using the Photoshop layers palette I add textures, mask, blend, adjust colour etc. and usually save a flattened tiff of my finished image. I always keep an unflattened copy too which does take up a lot of disc space but helps if I need to remember what I've done. I also make a sRGB 72ppi jpg copy for web use.



Luskentyre, Harris

I guess you get asked about technique a lot?

I always struggle to explain the technique to people who are not familiar with Photoshop and despite my best efforts they often end up thinking I paint onto my photographs! For those who have worked in Photoshop it's pretty easy to understand the basic premise which involves blending images together using the layers palette in Photoshop (or PS Elements).

What would you like to share with us about this?

It's hard to share exact protocols for doing this as so much of it is trial and error. I think the key to success is balancing colour / tone and in blending the textures so that the photography doesn't end up dark and muddy.

It's important not to process your original photo as you usually would for stand-alone photography – rather than increasing contrast, saturation and sharpness etc. it often works better if you start with quite a soft, desaturated image then adjust the curves or levels on that layer once you have added the textures. I also often use multiple copies of the background image, sometimes adding lens blur or tilt shift blur effects to defocus areas that are too detailed. I use this to simplify the image and to draw the eye to where I want the focal point to be.

Don't be scared to do things that you wouldn't dream of doing to a stand-alone photo; for example massively over-sharpening or taking the clarity down or noise reduction up can create really interesting effects.

On each layer of texture I nearly always apply clipping masks so that I am only adding texture to specific areas of the landscape and the collage builds section by section. I also use masks to change the colours of portions of each layer as I go along, rarely do I stick with the original colour of the texture or the background image.

I use all sorts of weird and wonderful techniques to make textures including one which is a photo of the bottom of my kitchen sink! I now make most of the textures that I use but I started out using Flypaper Textures which are fabulous.



Coral Beach, Skye

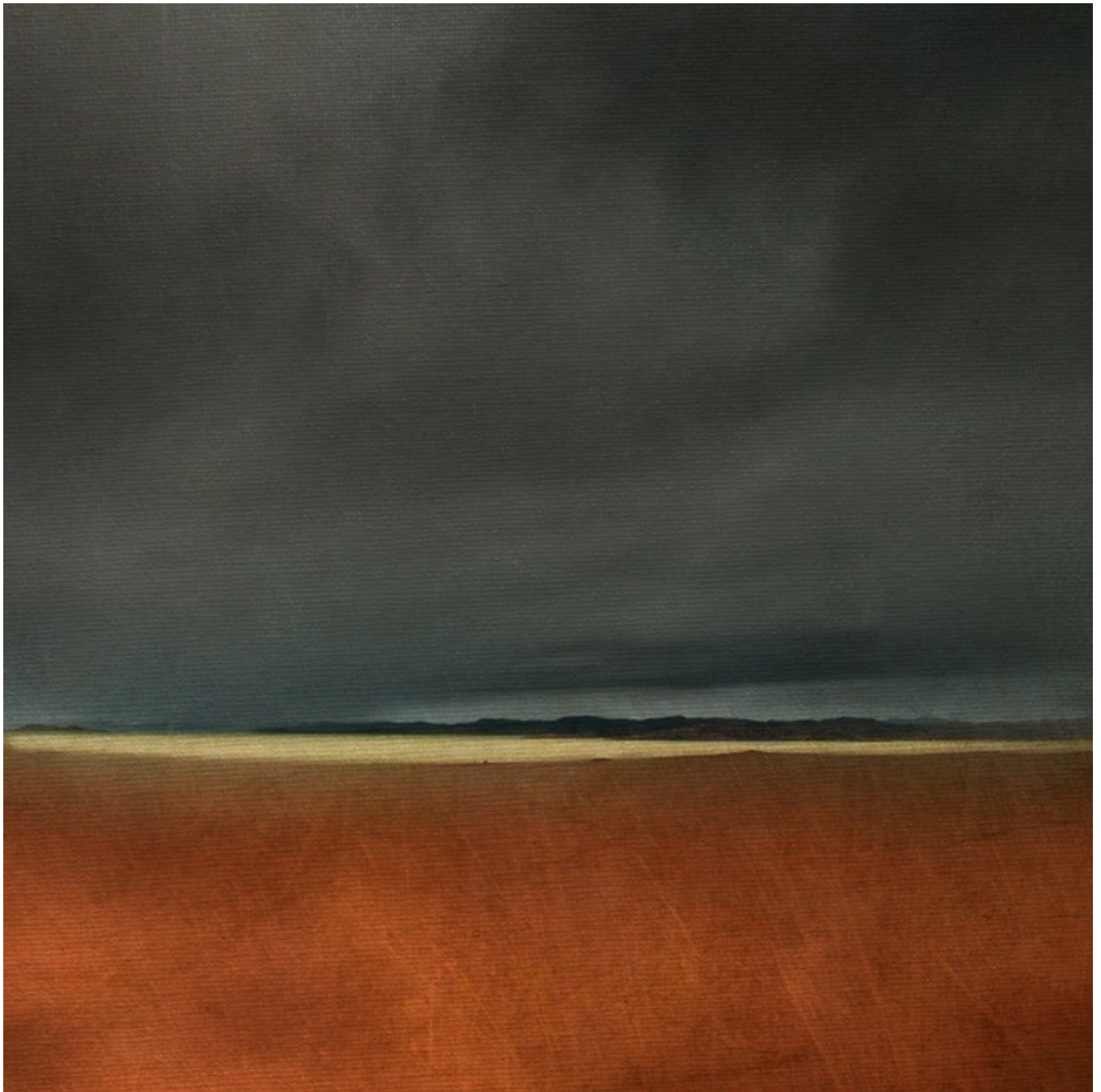
Do you get many of your pictures printed and where/how do you get them printed?

Most of my images are printed eventually. Up until very recently I've always printed at home on Epson archival matte paper using a Canon PIXMA A3plus printer but now, to save time, my printing is done by Bob, a local printer and framer (First4Frames, in Falkirk). I make limited edition prints in standard sizes from 5×5" which fit cheap Ikea frames to large 2×3 foot giclée prints and canvases. In the past I've tried some on-line fine art print companies and had terrible problems with colour matching but this hasn't been a problem working with a local company.

I've recently started learning about sublimation printing which is essentially a heat transfer process. This has involved buying a dedicated inkjet printer that runs sublimation inks plus a heat press for doing the transfers. I've been really pleased with the results, especially on mugs and ceramic coasters. I'm also playing around with printing onto large ceramic tiles which will eventually be wall mounted when I figure out how!

Tell me what your favourite two or three photographs are and a little bit about them.

Red Inverpolly



"Red Inverpolly" is my current favourite. I like its simplicity, it's only a patch of light on the sand under a grey sky but it works for me.

The Road North



I also quite like one of my photos of Glencoe which I've called "The Road North". I went to great lengths to find spots where the road through the glen wouldn't be in shot but in the end I used the road complete with a queue of caravans driving off into a big rain cloud. People seem to identify with this rather than the romanticised version that I had originally planned.

Strange Day



I am quite proud of an image I made of the Firth of Forth called "Strange Day". I happened to be there when this phenomenal thunderstorm was brewing and I think that the cargo boat gives this great sense of scale. I was pleased with way the texture work turned out on this one too. I had this one printed 3 foot long and it was hanging above my fire place until somebody bought it a few weeks ago.

You've built up an impressive list of stockists across Scotland, how hard has this been to do?

I've been very lucky I think. The first few stockists approached me rather than the other way around so I managed to get the ball rolling without having to face the horrors of rejection! Otherwise I might well have given up after a couple of early rejections. All of my current stockists are small independent retailers running gift shops and galleries, which means that generally speaking they are really nice to deal with and they usually understand the pressures and limitations of running a small business. I started off stocking shops on a "sale or return" basis. This tends to be a pretty relaxed arrangement but in January this year I did my first trade fair at the SECC in Glasgow so I now stock a lot more shops on a wholesale basis which means bigger orders, invoices to keep track of and much tighter profit margins! I think that a combination of selling directly to customers at markets, through my website and stocking shops on a sale or return /wholesale works very well for me and business is still growing.



East Lothian Field

What are you most proud of in your photography?

Knowing that some of my work is hanging in people's living rooms makes me really proud.

If you were told you couldn't do anything photography related for a week, what would you end up doing?

I have a huge laundry pile, a husband and three kids – all could do with more attention!



Cockenzie Power Station

What sorts of things do you think might challenge you in the future or do you have any photographs or styles that you want to investigate? Where do you see your photography going in terms of subject and style?

I'd love to have time to get out with the camera more often than I do – there are hundreds of places in Scotland that I've yet to visit and new techniques I would like to try, particularly multiple exposures which the D3100 doesn't do in-camera unfortunately. I've played around with long exposures but they usually end up with a blurry child running through the middle of the shot. I think the simplification that you achieve with creative techniques like ICM and long exposure is a perfect partner to adding texture so I want to continue to move in this direction. I'm also planning to buy the lensbaby edge 80 tilt lens which looks like a lot of fun.

Who do you think we should feature as our next photographer?

[Frances Seward](#) – I found her work on Etsy a few weeks ago and it's really special.

Thank you Cath. Cath has two websites – [Paper Snapdragon](#) for her images and another – [Snapdragon Textures](#) – through which she sells textures (there are a couple of tutorials and free to download samples if you fancy trying this technique). You can also check out Cath's diary – busy with events – [here](#)

Coral Beach, Skye

Forth Valley from Castle Campbell

Isle of Harris, Hill with Grass

Belhaven Bay



Luskentyre, Harris

Luskentyre Bay, Harris



Stac Pollaidh

Red Inverpolly

Portobello Light



Cockenzie Power Station

Strange Day, Firth of Forth

£2 Beach, Seacliffs, East Lothian



East Lothian Field

East Lothian Field, Yellow

Camusdarach Beach, Arisaig



The Road North, Glencoe

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