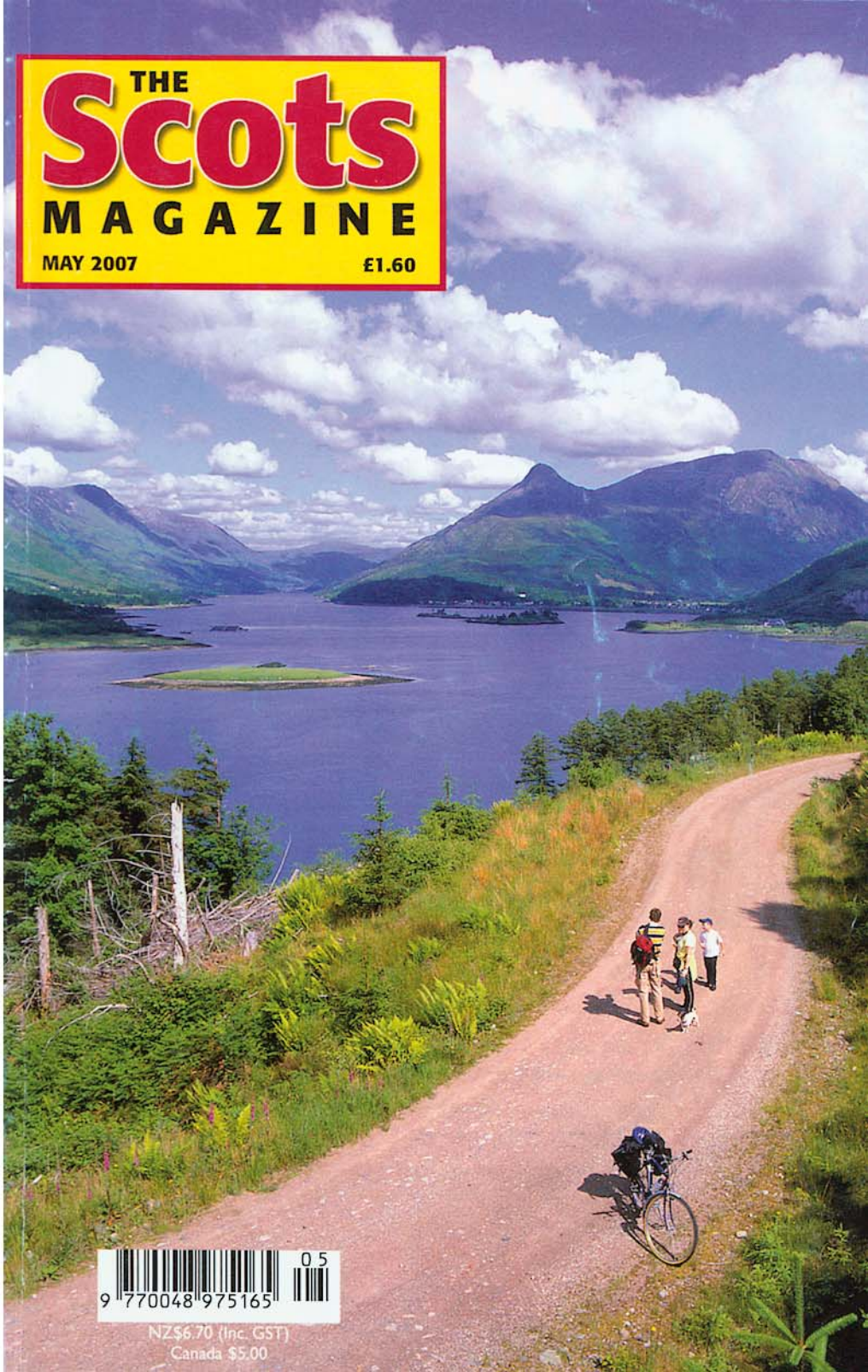


THE Scots MAGAZINE

MAY 2007

£1.60



NZ\$6.70 (Inc. GST)
Canada \$5.00

TRUE COLOURS

Craig Whyte



IT took a two-year stint in the Seychelles for award-winning Scottish land and seascape painter Pam Carter to see the Hebridean islands in their true colours. Now she has made the Hebrides her own and her stunning interpretations of sweeping beaches, turquoise waters and big, vivacious skies are exhibited throughout the UK and as far afield as Oregon, USA.

AS a lifelong lover of the Hebrides and long-time admirer of Pam's work, I wanted to find out about the artist's special relationship with the islands, and to learn about the creative process that enables her to capture so well their illusive magic.

I visited Pam at her home and studio in Torrance, just north of Glasgow. On the face of it, Torrance seems an odd choice for an artist with such close creative ties to coastal places, but it's a relatively short drive

from here to either coast — Pam also paints the east. Besides, the artist's garden is a virtual shrine to the sea, a finely-ordered litter of creels, nets, buoys and dolphin bones. There is even an old Hebridean rowing boat that sits in the shade of a garden tree; a rusty anchor secures it to the lawn.

"It came from Skye," explains Pam. "The boat itself cost me nothing, but having it transported down here was pretty expensive!"

It seems that the sea is in her blood.

Yet Pam was born and spent her formative years on the plains of East Africa, in Tanzania. Her father was from the south side of Glasgow, her mother from land-locked Austria. Those early years in Tanzania, though, were influential.

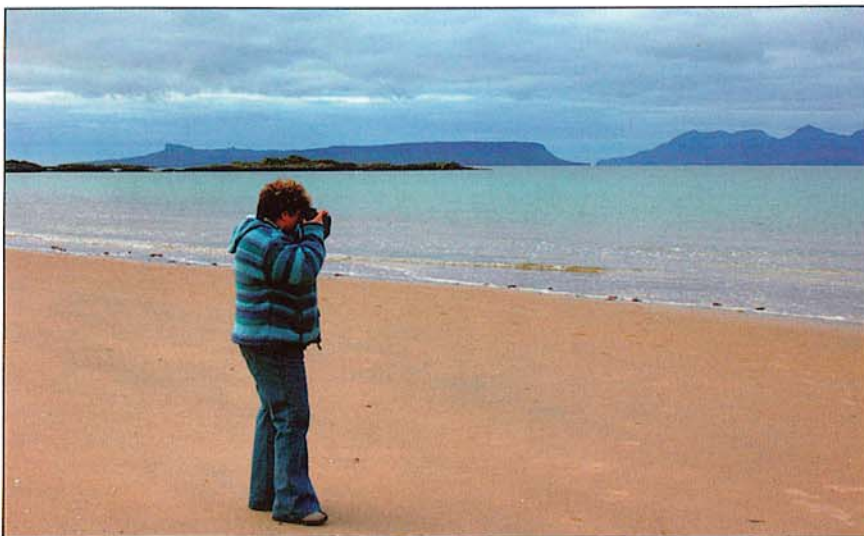
"As a child I lived in Arusha, Tanganyika (now Tanzania), a beautiful setting for a town under the most perfectly-shaped mountain, Mount Meru. I was playing with the other kids when I saw a man setting up his easel and chair and proceeding to paint the mountain. I watched him for a long time as he captured the patchwork fields in the foothills with the back-drop of the mountain. It made me love the view and be

*Sun Colours, Eriskay. (Available as a Limited Edition Print from Ecosse Fine Art.)
Inset: Pam Carter.*

determined to be an artist one day."

The family moved to Glasgow when Pam was 13, and she later went on to study at the Glasgow School of Art.

"The training at the School gave a good grounding in draughtsmanship and paint techniques. Our subject matter was largely from life and indoors — both life painting and still life. There is a camaraderie among the students who were in the class of William Drummond Bone; he had us drawing statues and busts till our pencil skills were crisp! We were not led down a conceptual



Pam's inspiration, with views to Eigg and Rum.

route and certainly landscape wasn't possible because of the lack of access to the countryside. I did make extra trips to the School's outpost at Culzean Castle on the Ayrshire coast and this gave me a taste for landscape and the love of coastal scenes."

Pam describes her early work as "typically Glasgow" — misty greys, with subtle changes of colour — but her artist's eye view of the world was to change radically in the new and clear lighting of the Seychelles.

"During the time I spent there my use of colour heightened and my subject matter changed. I was painting beaches, turquoise waters, large-leaved undergrowth and bold shadows. I concentrated on the shacks and colonial houses. When I returned to Scotland I did not know how to proceed.

"I visited the Botanic Gardens for a touch of the tropics! But it wasn't until I discovered the islands that I was comfortable painting again. The isolated sweeping sands and bright waters captured my imagination. Crofts were substituted for shacks!"

Croft houses feature frequently in Pam's painting. It is as much the

human element — the cottages, washing lines, the fences — as the raw grandeur of nature that defines her island work.

Pam has evolved a seven-stop procedure that allows her to capture the abstract qualities of a scene.

"I worked from life for 10 years or so until I realised it was so impractical and quite frustrating. I was either lecturing during daylight hours or the weather changed the scene so quickly that the painting had to be finished from memory anyway. Now I only begin the process on location.

"My ideas for my work are loosely based on my photographs, my sketches and my inspiration from being at the scene. I make special trips to find my subject matter and, while there, take hundreds of photographs from all angles. I often go back at different times of day or weather conditions, making assessments then and there about composition, lighting, contrasts, abstractions and colour."

Back in the studio, Pam works over several stages to allow her to consider the composition to a greater extent and find the underlying structures of the scene.

"A painting often turns out like an interior designer's schematic colour chart," she comments, "relishing in



Pam's maritime garden, a finely-ordered litter of creels, nets and buoys.

blues or basking in greys and ochre. My gut feeling about these principles lets me recapture the mood or indeed create a new one."

Pam calls herself a "green" artist. She recycles paint, using whatever colour is left on her palette — usually grey, being a blend of leftover colour — as the under-colour for a new work. On returning to the canvas she paints blocks — in any colour — then, when this is dry, she draws her initial ideas with a sable brush in Prussian Blue.

Stage four is one of the most expressive. Here she blocks in the scene with a broad brush, taking liberties with colour and lighting. She draws again at stage five, correcting composition if required, defining some of the detail and making marks (to remind her of the main blocks of the composition). Next, she paints with full expression — wet-in-wet paint — the quality of the paint being very rich by this time. The final stage is to touch up the odd line, white surf or orange chimney pot.

The result — a picture of Hebridean magic!

It was Pam's paintings of the island of Tiree that first grabbed my attention. It happened in Dunkeld, many miles from the coast; but it was there on a casual visit to a little

gallery on Atholl Street that I first stepped into the island world of Pam Carter. I recognised Tiree immediately, not for the view itself, but for the feel of the island, its unique blend of beach, sky and sea, and its distinctive Hebridean houses scattered across its sandy plain.

Pam paints many Scottish islands, but I can't help feeling that Tiree is where she is closest to her element. The most westerly of the Inner Hebrides, Tiree has an "outer" feel. The thorough dominance of sea and sky, the fragility of the land, whose sandy substance might blow away in the ocean wind, or whose lowly platform the Atlantic might reclaim in a world of rising sea levels, (Tiree has for long been known as "the land beneath the waves"), leave you with the distinct notion that Tiree belongs as much to the ocean as to the land.

It is one of the sunniest places in the UK, at times *the* sunniest, yet the Atlantic clouds that periodically drench the mountains of neighbouring Mull are never far away and add an unpredictability, a dynamism that places with more settled weather lack.



Sanday dunes. Pam also paints the landscapes of the Orcadian isles.

I asked Pam about her relationship with Tiree.

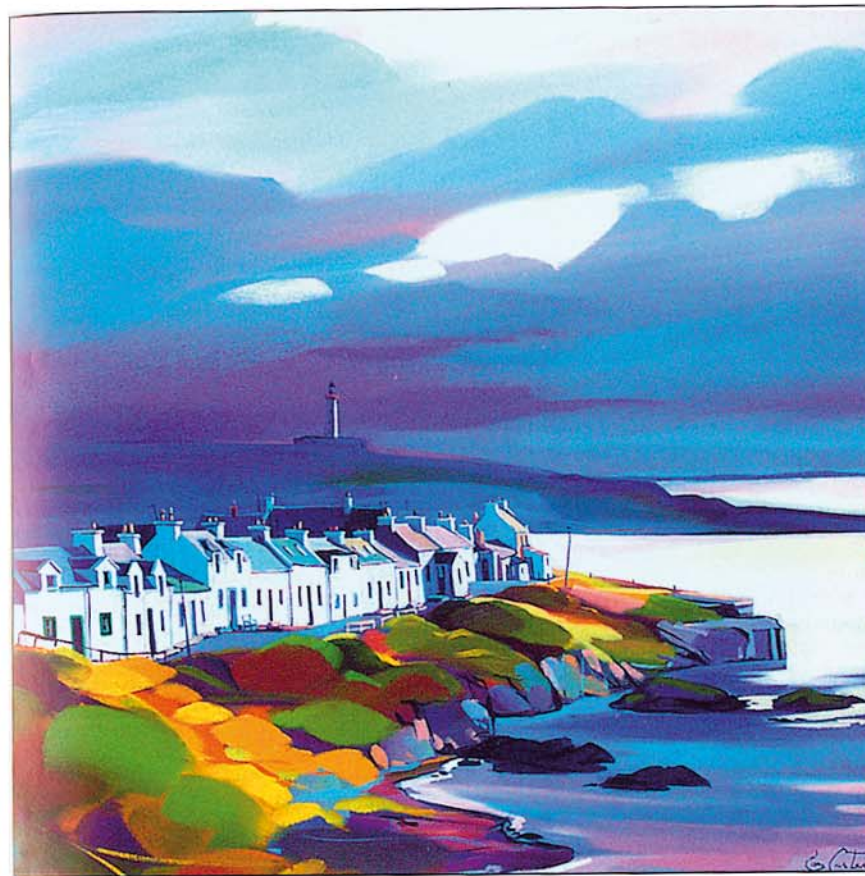
"It's my favourite island!" she confirms. But what is it in particular that makes Tiree unique?

"It's like a museum to island architecture. It is the only island that has retained in abundance the characteristic Hebridean houses — the pudding-shaped, black-felted roofs and thatches, with thick, white-washed walls. They are dotted around the island and are built on the edges of the most idyllic beaches with sweeping sand dunes and tropical turquoise water. The flat landscape

lets you breathe and gives an appearance of a 'big sky'. I love coming in to Tiree by ferry on a sunny day — the white cottages are like jewels on the horizon."

It might seem like a museum, but Tiree is the real deal. With a population numbering several hundred, whereas other similarly-sized isles struggle to maintain populations in three figures, Tiree has retained much of its earlier settlement pattern, its township clusters of traditional houses and cottages. At a time, in the 19th century, when whole island communities were being swept away, their land bundled into a few large sheep farms, Tiree retained its crofting tenure and, with it, a relatively dense population.

But to single out Tiree is



Storm Light, Portnahaven. The more southerly isles of Arran, Bute and Islay are not forgotten.

misleading, as Pam seems equally at home wherever there is a dynamic stramash of sky, sea, and fertile land. Many of her works are commissions, and these have taken her more recently not only to the Western Isles, but to Orkney, and to the more southerly isles of Arran, Bute and Islay. Each setting has its own particular atmosphere. She enjoys the new material, but is drawn again and again to the same islands.

"I'm obsessed with painting Rum," she confesses, "I search it out from all the islands I visit."

And that is the beauty of the Hebrides. You can be on one island, stunning in itself, and yet have breathtaking views to the other islands, each more enticing with every "step" taken towards them.

Each island has its own distinctive shape which changes subtly with shifting perspective. But most of the isles remain individually recognisable from all angles by seasoned Hebridean travellers.

Rum is a relatively small island, but it has for long been a distinguished Hebridean landmark, occupying a significant place in outlooks from Skye, Mull, Coll and the Outer Hebrides. Its mountains, the Rum Cuillin, rejoice in Norse nomenclature — Askival, Hallival, Trallval, the last possibly hinting at the presence of trolls — reflecting a rich

heritage with its roots in the Norse-Celtic sea world of the 9th to 13th centuries.

During those dim and distant times, the isles of the Atlantic were bound together by well-travelled seaways and the Kingdom of Scotland lay far across the west mainland mountains. It was, and remains, a world apart — one that compels many first-time visitors to return again and again.

Like many Hebridean visitors, Pam's first island was Skye, largest and, some would say, most spectacular of the Inner Hebrides; it remains one of the principal subjects of her painting. Could she recall her first impressions of the "winged isle"?

"I was awestruck by the dramatic and changing light sequences. I love travelling round the island and being spoilt for things to see — from the spectacular mountain ranges to the abundance of local craft shops. I would say that I had 'done' the typical tourist loop roads on the first year only to miss the most spectacular views of the Cuillin and rocky beach at Elgol. Being at the end of a dead-end road most people do not venture there. The beach has an overhanging rock made of Jurassic sandstone and has the appearance of honeycomb. I have visited it every year since 1991."

With exhibitions throughout mainland Scotland, the isles, and far beyond, Pam's reputation is growing. I wondered how she is received in the islands that she paints; are the islanders especially critical? Pam believes that her work goes down well with island audiences.

"I hope they appreciate that I am expressing my love of their islands and bringing a new vision of that island to others."

This year, Pam has also exhibited in Suffolk, a coastal area with its own rich seascapes. Is this a case of coals to Newcastle, I wondered, or is there a market in such places for Scottish seascapes?


"They seem to love the colours. There has been very positive feedback. I think Scottish painters are a little bit brighter because of the purity of light we have up here. Thankfully Scottish art is being

recognised and sought after."

It is the light of the isles that Pam captures so well. The Hebrides are a world of vast, brooding ocean clouds and searing sunbeams, of soft moist air and crisp, clear light, of dramatic sunrises and lingering sunsets — contrasts that are reflected in her art. The Atlantic air is always fresh, invigorating, being constantly replenished by its steady flow over thousands of miles of pure ocean. It can be still but is never stagnant.

There is energy there — the same energy that makes me want to run in the wind sends Pam scurrying for her paints and easel. The colours she uses are bold and vivid, but never false. Scenes of deep smokey-blue cloud amassing over softly sparkling sands or brightly-lit meadows are truly Hebridean. Sometimes, though, she seems to draw in shades of light that are perhaps beyond the visible spectrum; ultra-blues, infra-reds and ethereal green creep into Pam's painting, manifestations perhaps of an other-worldly quality that words and photos can only partially translate.

"I use colour to interpret the light," she tells me, "and of course tone is therefore very important. I may force colours that I see, but it is to evoke the mood of the scene. I love putting one colour down to react with another. Sometimes the play of colour creates a beautiful blend of sea, sky or beach or alternatively a rugged textured shoreline. Years of playing with colour relationships has hopefully resulted in beautiful pictures. Let's face it — that's what the artist does — picture make."

It seems like an understatement. Picture-making it may be, but Pam's work is much more than that. She seems to have captured the very essence, the spirit of the isles, and if you're not yet convinced . . . well, perhaps it's time to visit the islands again. Look, listen, smell and feel. Experience and enjoy. Then look again at Pam's painting. You might just see the islands in a new light . . . and in their true colours. 

www.pamcarter.com