

Mary Lloyd Jones is 90! It is hard to fathom that someone so free in spirit, vision and enthusiasm for the world could be that age. And yet, she has always been an artist who makes the world anew.



Indeed, Mary Lloyd Jones is known for her contemporary handling of history. She juxtaposes ancient symbols and colours with her visionary perspective on the Welsh landscape. She renders old paths brand new with oils and textiles and an unexpected use of marks that forces the viewer to reimagine landscape in two ways. On the one hand, we are encouraged to look again at our known physical landscape - Cymru and her mountains and rivers and the traces of her industry. On the other hand, Jones's thorough interrogation of the Welsh countryside, sometimes on canvasses bigger than any human body, calls into question the way these landscapes are traditionally depicted in visual art and writing for the outsider's gaze: virginal land, smooth land, empty land.

For me, her paintings seem in direct opposition to the saturated, colour-coded, lazy smack of mass-produced paintings, coasters and teatowels of Ceredigion's coastal towns. The distinct absence of the sea in most of Mary's paintings, her dedication to the mud, grass, fields and sky, to the landlocked, show a determination to dig beyond appearances, as she avoids putting a watery veil between her and her subject matter. It is striking that she has painted so much of Cwm Rheidol, now perhaps best known for transporting tourists on the steam train from Aberystwyth to Pontarfynach, (Mary's birthplace). She has painted this dense, stark, familiar Cwm on her own terms, for her own understanding. There is no attempt in her paintings to flatten or square off its darker corners or its industrial past for an outsider sweetly travelling through the Vale, hoping to pick up a souvenir postcard on the way home. Mary Lloyd Jones uses paint to understand things, not to accessorize.

Her work reveals and investigates relationships: the push and pull of land, history and language – between the visible and the unseen, colour and drudgery, loss and hope.

Mary Lloyd Jones' will to make things, to work, to share her view of the world appears to be never-ending and infectious, and seems only to grow and grow as she approaches her tenth decade of contributing to Wales' visual culture. Meeting her, six decades your senior, you cannot help but think that her relentless positivity and creativity have sustained her career, health and wellbeing for much longer than most of us could dream of. At her home in Aberystwyth, there are drawers and drawers of beautiful never-seen-before paintings and drawings, histories in layers: histories of personal, local and international importance. Looking at these, you realise that Mary's capacity to pay attention to landscapes and peoples is unending. Take a moment whilst looking around this exhibition celebrating her 90 years of life, to think about the persistence of her vision as a female artist. She carved out a career of colour for herself, spanning many decades, art movements, political changes, waves of feminism and economic and climate crises.

Force of nature are the best words in English I can use to describe her. The best English words. Because for me visual experiences, specifically looking at Mary Lloyd Jones' landscapes, feel like they happen differently in Welsh as opposed to English. What does it mean to see visual work through the lens of a verbal language? Is this even possible?

Our verbal languages shape how we view the visual, and there are parts of both that lie beyond translation. Pontarfynach, the name of Mary's birthplace, a fountain (or waterfall) of inspiration throughout her career, belongs to a different world, contains a completely different set of connotations, than the English Devil's Bridge. Her work marks a difference, in identity and culture and a way of seeing, that cannot be directly translated or copied. It is the distinct vision of someone who has known the veins and guts of the places she paints.

It is this feeling that helps to explain in part why Mary Lloyd Jones' work has captivated me, and why my companionship with her is one of the most significant of my life. All her massive quilts, big canvasses and tiny sketches seem to be painted in my mother tongue (putting aside for a minute the actual use of Welsh words on her paintings). The shapes, colours and forms for me speak of and through the Welsh language. It is a naming and claiming of places through colour. It is a visual resistance against the smoothening and flattening of other ways of being and seeing, it is a chromatic chaos of fields and symbols and skies to combat the chocolate box commodification of the Welsh countryside. It is scars, ruptures, interruptions, shocks of colour that slice across the romantic, palatable idealisation of places where people have actually lived, and are living now, and will be living still. In moving away from conventional representation, she brings clarity.

Her paintings explain things differently, uncovering the tones, bruises, and complications of landscapes so familiar to her that they cannot be rendered perfect, blotchless, sanitised. They are messy, defiantly pushing against definition, letting the viewer do some digging. Put the postcard down and look up.

Pen-blwydd hapus iawn Mary Lloyd Jones. Diolch am bob ysbrydoliaeth ac arweiniad.

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