



Sarah Harper – An Artist Inspired by her Surroundings

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As seen in Latitude Magazine Issue 44

Artist Sarah Harper knows a thing or two about farming through droughts and snowstorms. She has lived at the family farm at Mt Somers most of her life; experiencing long hot summers, nor'westers and arctic blasts, all strong influences in her art.

SHE RECALLS THE DIFFICULT years of the early 1980's. Her parents worked very hard in order to educate her and her two sisters, bank interest rates were high and the farm subsidies had come off. They were challenging times and you needed grit and determination to survive and stay on your land.

"About three nights a week Dad would drive to Dunsandel with our neighbour and pick squash to help pay the bills. They slept on the back of a truck at night. My mother was a great sewer and started Prudence Shirts, a ladies' shirt business, to help support us. My sisters, Georgie and Penny, and I learnt a lot from those years and it has given us all a great 'backbone' for life. Everyone has tough times but stick at whatever it is, work hard and don't give up," shares Sarah.

Today Sarah's sisters have businesses of their own and Sarah works as a full time artist. She lives with her husband Zac and their two children Margot, 13 and Murphy, 11. Their farm at Mt Somers is an intensive mixed arable livestock property, with cropping, dairy support and lamb fattening, a plethora of pets and animals, usually ones Sarah has saved from dying!

Growing up, Sarah went to Springburn Primary School and has very happy memories there. She always loved animals, particularly birds. As a child she spent hours out on the farm with a ladder in tow, in search of bird eggs to add to her extensive bird egg collection. Today she still loves birds; in fact she loves all animals and has about twenty ducks, four cats, a peacock, countless pet lambs and seven working dogs that are like house pets.

Boarding school was not really her 'thing' and she often yearned to get back on the farm. She loved coming home and being surrounded by nature and her animals. Art was very important to her throughout her high school years and she attended many courses with New Zealand artists during the school holidays, fueling her love to be around creative people, colour and paint.

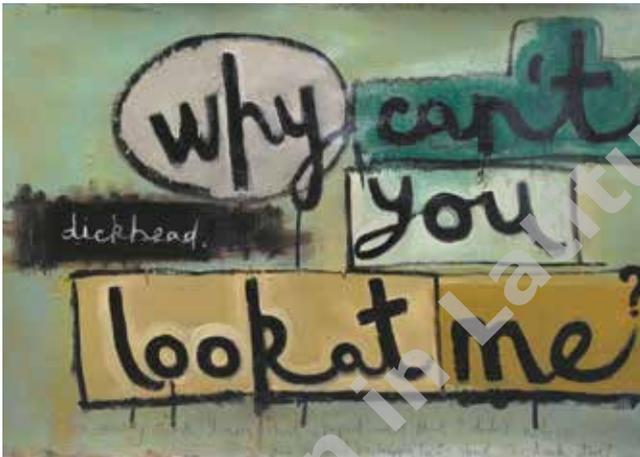
OPPOSITE: Sarah paints in her art studio near the house, it was previously used as a double garage, she loves working here especially in winter when the log burner keeps her warm. Above right: From a large series of self-portrait works painted in 2013.

Right: "I bribed the children with ice-cream money when they were about 5 and 6 years old, two dollars each to sit for me for half an hour so I could paint them. Murphy jiggled and disappeared and the piece was never finished, the hands are missing but it doesn't really matter," laughs Sarah. Murphy made the wire sculpture in front of the piece and Sarah added the birds, the lamp is from the Mayfield junk shop.





Above: One of Sarah and Zac's four cats, Charlie was a stray cat, whom Sarah saved and even took on a family trip to Nelson one day when the cat was meant to be put down. Now, she is the friendliest of them all...



After high school Sarah went to Lincoln University and completed a Bachelor of Commerce Degree. She then took off overseas for three-and-a-half years, beginning in Australia, and then travelling extensively around Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

Returning home at the end of 1998, Sarah lived with her parents for nearly a year while she got enough work together for an exhibition. It was a solo show of watercolour work held at the Ashburton Society of Arts, Short Street Studio. Although Sarah had had a long break from her art while she was away, the time living back at her parents allowed her the luxury of getting back into her painting again.

"My parents have always been supportive of my art and I am very grateful for the encouragement I have received. I remember one Christmas when I was about thirteen or fourteen; they paid for me to attend a watercolour class with Kath von Tunzelmann. It was quite life changing and it set me on a definite career path."

Sarah has been painting and exhibiting since 1989. She would paint and exhibit whenever she had time between school and university commitments and on returning home from overseas, her painting has become her career and her passion.

Above left: An oil on paper from the series *Fourteen*, which was recently exhibited at the XCHC in Christchurch.

Left: Painting from the Death series 2006 *Three Too Many*. "In 2006 we had snow on the ground for three weeks and there were a lot of deaths, I can't cope with animals suffering."



Above: The front of house where Sarah and her family now live, and where the two generations of Harpers grew up before her.

Below left: "Outdoor living where we enjoy views towards Mt Hutt."

Below: *I've been a little angry lately*, also from Sarah's recent fourteen series exhibition at the XCHC.



Thanks to Zac, her studio is housed in the original garage at home. He replaced the garage doors with glass French doors, put sheets of clear light plastic in the roof for light and also installed an old logburner for winter heating. The studio is a precious and private space for Sarah and is filled with works; older work and work in progress, canvases and large works on paper, sketchbooks and an abundance of art supplies. It looks out onto the front garden and beyond to Mt Hutt and the Southern Alps.

“When the children were very little, Margot was born in 2002 and Murphy in 2003, I would get up in the wee hours of the morning (2am or 3am actually, I still do when I am on a painting tangent!), and paint through until about 7am. It was a great time to work. I could be alone and I knew the children were safely tucked up in bed and if they did wake, Zac was there. I have always taken my mothering quite seriously and sometimes find it

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hard to find the right balance between being a mother and being an artist. They don’t always go hand in hand!”

The children often wanted to paint with her in the studio but their pinks and yellows were a far cry from Sarah’s dark, serious works of browns and ochre’s.

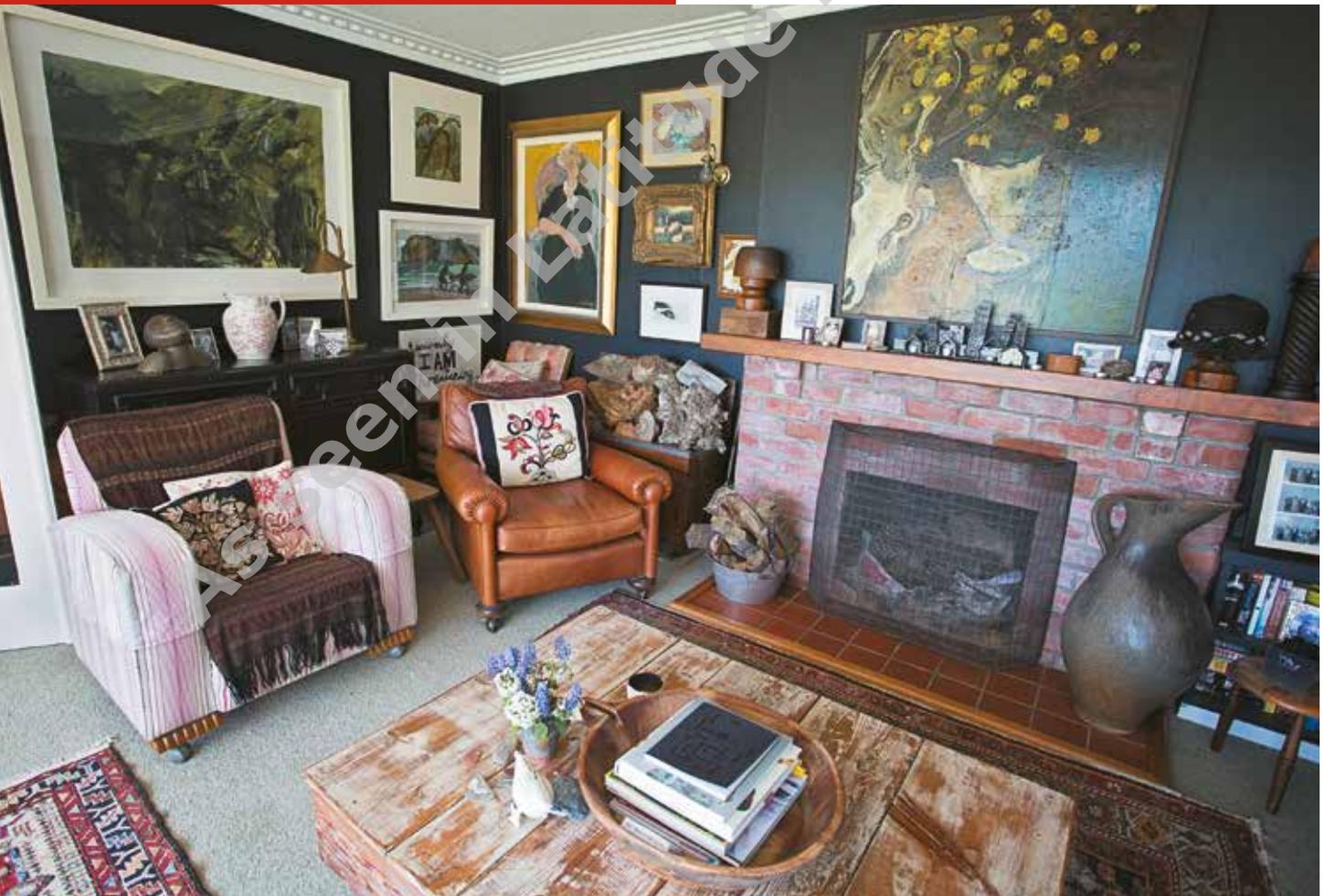
“Now the children are older, I love to be in my studio all day and I enjoy them being in there with me. They are great art critics. I do less on the farm now, painting is my work.”

Whenever she can, Sarah bundles herself off to as many galleries as possible to get her cultural ‘fix’ and inspiration. She will travel to Wellington, for instance, for a day just to visit galleries.

“I am time obsessed and am constantly drawing up weekly, monthly or term calendars sorting out the juggling act of being an active and involved parent and having a ‘run’ of studio days.” These work calendars were the inspiration for some of her latest work recently exhibited in her series *Fourteen*, at the XCHC gallery in Christchurch in August this year.

Below: “We both like being fairly organized at home, you have to be disciplined to work from home, otherwise it doesn’t really work,” remarks Sarah.

In their living room they enjoy a wide collection of artwork; the oil on the left is one of Catherine Brough’s, a Jane Evans (lady in the chair), and a small watercolour painted by Sarah’s grandmother, to name a few.





Above: Zac and Sarah enjoying a quiet moment flanked by two of their favourite pieces, the one on the left is one of son Murphy's artworks and on the right is Leila Goddard's *Waiting for a View*, a New Zealand artist from Nelson.

Below right: Sarah standing in the kitchen whisking milk for yet another abandoned lamb: "We rescued it from our farm at Diamond Harbour, I had to bring it home, I couldn't leave it."

"*Fourteen* represented a significant shift in my work. I had not experimented with text before in my painting. It all happened quite organically. I followed my intuition and, as usual, what was 'firing' me up at that time. I am drawn to darker subject matter, things that concern me. Things I want to make a 'noise' about." Sarah explains.

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She has always enjoyed painting still-life subjects and often returns to these during 'quiet' periods between series of work. Over the last few years her series have been increasingly influenced by her surroundings and happenings around her.

"I work in series, exploring a subject, theme or an emotion until it has exhausted itself within me. I like to create awareness and to stimulate thought."



Back in 2006, Canterbury farmers were faced with the snowstorm from hell. On the 12th June that year, the entire South Island awoke to a blanket of snow that became frozen and lingered in some areas for weeks. Sarah and her family were without power for nearly three weeks. Sarah's mother looked after their small children while she helped Zac on the farm, feeding out and clearing snow in tracks for the stock. Sarah struggled with the amount of deaths and picking up the dead bodies of their sheep and lambs. This event triggered a massive shift in her work and her focus. It became the catalyst for her 2006 *Death Series*.

She then moved on to her *Dairy, Dairy Me series*, which she began exhibiting in 2008. This came about by observing and experiencing the massive changes that had begun around the Canterbury landscape. The landscape and landmarks that she knew so well were all changing. Dry land sheep farms with established old shelterbelts were being replaced by irrigated, green dairy farms. Trees were going and workers houses were popping up everywhere.

"The change to the Canterbury landscape has been enormous. I still find it difficult to comprehend. I realise one must move forward, make changes and progress but it feels like the area that is so familiar to me has been completely defaced."

With the development happening around Mid Canterbury, Sarah always finds plenty of inspiration. She is motivated by the earthworks, stone piles and the sea of green, and intrigued by the connection and effect it has on humans and animals.



Above: Invitation from the *Fourteen Series* exhibition, www.sarahharper.co.nz

Below: Sarah feeding the ducks, the ducks with the orange bills were bought on Trade me and the other Muscovy ducks were given to her, by a farmer when she tried to save them on a main highway, much to her daughter's embarrassment.

Sarah's work is very honest and thought provoking. Although her subject matter can change considerably at times, her work continues to challenge the viewer. She aims to stimulate thought, get conversations going and encourage people to ask questions and want to know more.

The day we visit Sarah it was a gorgeous, warm spring day, filled to the brim with colour, and she had been busy painting in the studio. Sarah has been working on a challenge to paint a self-portrait everyday. She shows us her favourite and explains how sometimes her best art is often when something has really upset or moved her, the sign of a true artist. ■

