

Sarah Guppy

b.1957

Auckland Technical Institute (Graphics and Design)

Fine Art: Morley College, London

Like an old-style alchemist turning base metals into gold, Sarah Guppy describes her job as that of ‘transformer’. Instead of a blank canvas, her raw material is a pane of clear glass on which paint is transformed into a landscape of colour and light.

In *Nine Ribbons*, Guppy presents layers of what appears to be sea, land and sky caught in the translucent light of late evening and early morning. In this layered format, Guppy encourages the viewer to concentrate on the sensation of colours and light rather than look for a conventional landscape with foreground, middle-distance and background. The horizontal composition suggests a geological map of an imagined place, where the basic material isn't rock or sand but colour and light. Like the extraordinary views of sunrise or sunset that can be seen at high altitude on an international flight, there is a sense of catching something beautiful and spectacular, but not long-lasting.

Guppy studied graphics and design before completing an apprenticeship in the art of gilding (one of her later commissions was to gild the Ponsonby Post Office in Auckland). It was while working in the gilding studio that Guppy first came across the old but demanding technique of reverse painting on to glass. This process, popular in Italy at the time of the Renaissance (1420–1600), involves painting on to one side of a sheet of glass after which it is viewed from, or through, the other side. This means the artist has to paint in reverse or back to front. Usually, when an artwork is painted on to canvas, the artist will begin with a rough outline and gradually add layer after layer of paint until it is completed. Here, the painted side and the viewing side are opposed to one another, so the artist must begin with what will be seen first by the viewer. This means the final details have to be applied first and the background applied later.

As well as mastering an ancient technique, Guppy has immersed herself in the ideas and aesthetics of the period. According to Guppy, works on glass such as *Nine Ribbons* are inspired in part by the poetry of 11th century theologian, philosopher and poet St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed that knowledge was first experienced by the senses rather than analysed by the mind. His writings show an awareness of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural, faith and reason, the physical and the metaphysical. As he wrote in his poem *All Things Desire*: “God stood behind Himself one night and cast a brilliant shadow from which creation came. Even this shadow is such a flame that moths consume their selves in it every second – with their sacred passion to possess beautiful forms”.

Sally Blundell

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Reverse painting

