



Undiscovered Treasures

Jeremy Miles meets Brian Graham, a Swanage artist whose greatest joy is exploring Britain's prehistory through his landscapes

One thing you quickly learn about Dorset artist Brian Graham is that he's a great enthusiast. His paintings are powerful and emotive landscapes; evocations of the scars left by long-past habitation. They are inspired by years of visiting ancient sites, studying geological patterns and archeological artifacts. The things that excite him are the old flints, stones, arrowheads, fragments of long-forgotten lives that he collects on his regular walks along the Purbeck coast.

This gently spoken 64-year-old regularly returns to the house he shares with wife, Carol, with pockets full of strange objects, wondering at the stories they could tell. Their home overlooks Swanage, with glimpses of

towering cliffs and the sea. It's like a particularly homely gallery containing a wonder-world of fascinating flotsam: bits of old sea-defences, intriguing pieces of driftwood; there's even a dolphin's skull hanging on the kitchen wall.

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I was therefore not particularly surprised when I walked into Brian's Swanage studio a couple of years ago and he was cheerfully brandishing an axe. Not just any axe, you understand. This was a half-a-million-year-old

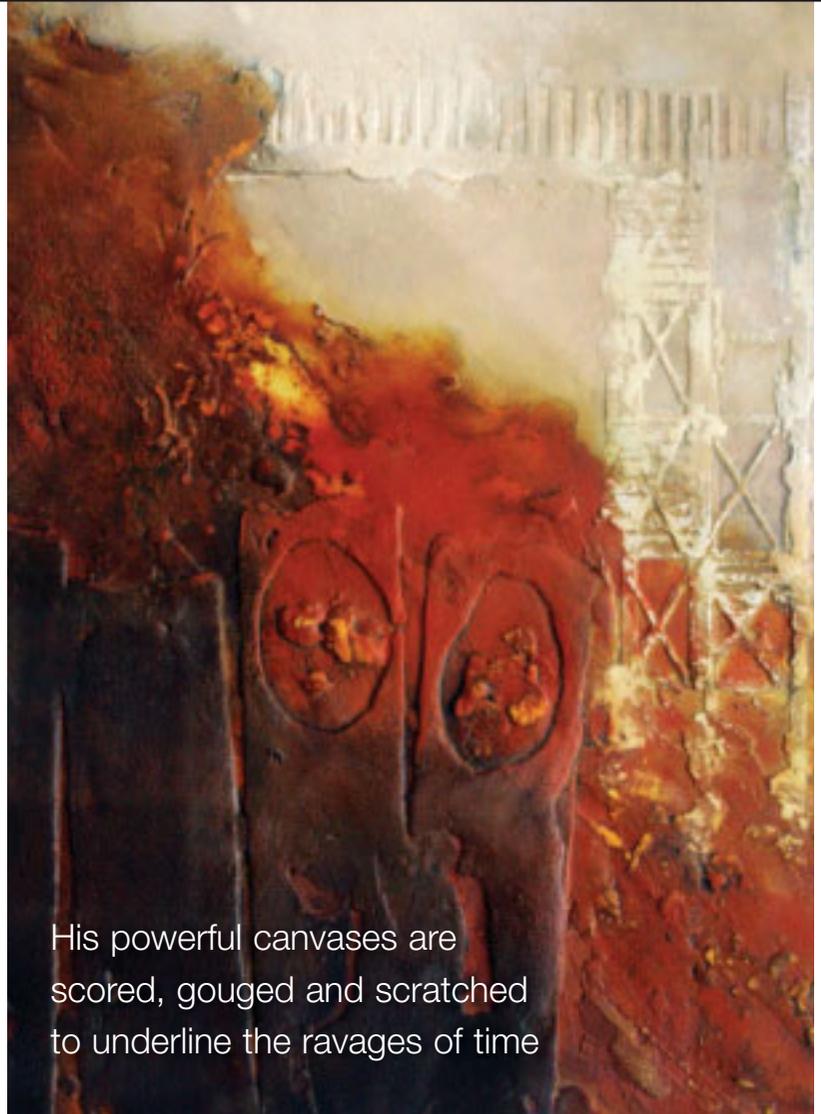
Above
Brian Graham on Swanage seafront

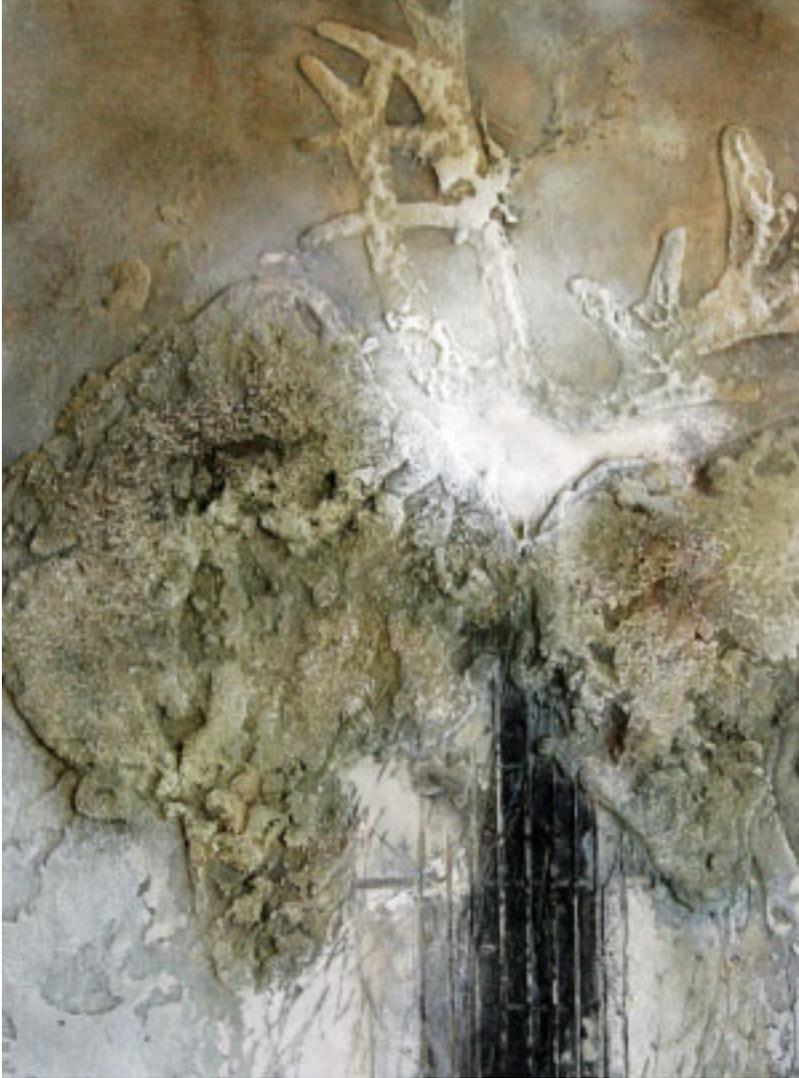
Opposite page
Paintings from the 'Start from Scratch' series – exploring archaeological sites that chart the development early man

hand-axe used for slaughtering and skinning animals like the great woolly rhinoceroses that once patrolled the south coast of prehistoric Britain. The flint hand-tool was a gift from the archaeologists in charge of the famous Boxgrove dig. Brian's piercing blue eyes sparkle with delight under a luxurious shock of grey hair as he talks about this trophy that he keeps with pride: a direct reminder of what his art is all about – the clues left on our landscape by the ancient past.

Strangely perhaps, Brian's paintings are often described as abstract. More often, though, they deal with the figurative reality of marks on the physical landscape left by flood, fire, ice, earthquakes, meteor storms and, of course, man. Any single canvas might portray a sweeping range of towering cliffs or a tiny detail on the side of a pebble. With a penchant for changing scale and a little imagination and intelligent guesswork thrown in for good measure, Brian manages to produce works that seem imbued with a solid honesty about the nature and history of landscape.

They work simply as fine paintings, of course, and sell extremely well, usually through The Hart Gallery in London's Islington, but they have also attracted the attention of some of Britain's leading archaeologists and geologists – the intellectual elite who work at the rock-





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face of our country’s prehistoric digs. In Brian Graham they have found someone who not only intuitively understands the fundamentals of their discipline but also has a way to tell a greater truth about the distant past.

Brian Graham cut his artistic teeth painting places like Hengistbury Head, a favourite haunt when he lived in Bournemouth 20 odd years ago. “What excited me about Hengistbury were the stories of reindeer hunters’ camps and so on – these were happening 11,500, maybe 12,000 years ago. That’s like yesterday compared with what I’ve been looking at recently,” he tells me. Even his 500,000-year-old hand-axe is beginning to look relatively modern.

Earlier this year research teams at Happisburgh in Norfolk uncovered evidence of human habitation nearly a million years ago, revolutionising the way we think about early human colonisation of Northern Europe. Brian visited the project team on-site and says he is particularly fascinated by the idea of a pre-Neanderthal race that may even have belonged to a different species. “I love the idea of our connection to these people, our shared humanity. I want to know who we are, where we have come from and what we are all about.”

His latest project has taken him to 33 different sites around the country. Called ‘Starting from Scratch’, it also bears the lengthy but descriptive subtitle: ‘Site-specific paintings that consider aspects of human activity from Britain’s ancient past’. It led to Brian producing a painting representing each location. Some of the sites were astonishingly rich in the information they had to yield. Others, he says, were a little more challenging. He instances a dig in Ipswich. “There’s really nothing there now except a housing estate and light industry. So I went to the local museum and looked at their collection of 400,000-year-old hand-axes to help me imagine what life was like.”

Back home in Dorset he shows me the paintings – a remarkable body of work. There are already major exhibitions lined up in Cardiff and Colchester, for late 2011 and early 2012, and more are almost certainly to follow.

Professor Clive Gamble, an eminent expert in the evolution of human society, said of him: "He shows a way of looking that is beyond the academic procedure. I think he believes that to look at the ancient past you need to take all points of view on board." Brian looks at his works and nods: "I think maybe my paintings do touch a nerve in that way." They certainly do. He uses variations of scale, ancient and contemporary imagery that indicate passing millennia and canvases are scored, gouged and scratched to underline the ravages of time.

Brian Graham's research may take him far and wide but his heart and soul belong in Dorset. He remembers the joys of playing in the family garden in Poole in the late 1940s and early 1950s. "We had a huge garden with a stream running through it. I remember digging and building camps. Even then I used to love finding different-coloured stones. When I think about it now, I realise that my childhood play became my adult fascination."

At school in Poole it was soon recognised that he was good at art. He was advised to become a commercial artist. He's glad he did. "I spent years working in marketing. It wasn't particularly what I wanted to do but it was invaluable experience and served me well." He has remained absolutely loyal to his home county and says he could never imagine living anywhere else. For many years he has been a Fine Art Consultant to Bournemouth University and two years ago was rewarded with an Honorary Doctorate.

He tells me that the greatest joy of exploring Britain's prehistory is in the certain knowledge that there are thousands of undiscovered treasures, every one of which can make the scientists gasp in amazement. "Every time they find something new it throws everything into disarray. It's so exciting. I'm certainly not drawing any conclusions with my paintings. I'm presenting evidence and allowing people to muse on it." □

Brian Graham will be showing at Sladers Yard, West Bay, Bridport, DT6 4EL from 19 March to 15 May, 01308 459511, sladersyard.co.uk. For more information about Brian Graham visit hartgallery.co.uk.



A display of found objects and curiosities on the wall of Brian and Carol Graham's kitchen in Swanage



Interesting stones found by Brian on his regular walks along the Purbeck coast