

Germaine Greer Who is Britain's hottest new artist? A 76-year-old called Rose Wylie



In a small house at the centre of a pretty Kent village live two artists, who happen to be married to each other. One of them is Rose Wylie, who works every day on large unstretched canvases, usually on three or four at once. She used to paint her canvases on the floor but, after her third hip replacement, she has to avoid squatting and now stands to work on canvases stapled to the walls of her studio, two side by side on each wall, hanging from ceiling to floor. There are layers and layers of them; to see the ones underneath, you have to duck under the ones on top and hold them over your head. More are piled on the floor. The house is crammed with canvases, because Wylie's work doesn't sell. Gallerists beg her to send them works in smaller format but, as part of what Wylie does is to magnify small motifs and lack of pretension itself to become something huge and arresting, their pleas are in vain.

She works on and on, day after day, processing everyday imagery into airy, crumply billboard-sized works. Heads stick through the upper edge and feet through the lower; text hangs off or straggles sidelong. Paint sits on the unprimed canvas, sometimes bobby, sometimes sketchy, and sometimes carved off and replaced. This is Wylie's kind of minimalism. She will draw a figure 50 times, until it looks as if it hasn't been drawn at all. If all else fails, she will cut a new patch of canvas and glue it over the old, so that she can have another go at getting the apparently artless image exactly right.

At the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC, a current exhibition called *Women to Watch* featuring "underrepresented and/or emerging women artists" has chosen, besides seven women from the US, one woman from the UK: 76-year-old Wylie. The picture that was selected is *Lords and Ladies*, which was inspired by



Lords and Ladies, 2007-2009, by Rose Wylie, currently on show in Washington DC

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something Wylie read in this newspaper: "For better for worse, divorce is always stressful, but... supportive colleagues make life easier." She began, as usual, by making small drawings of a bride and (in her words) "the groom reduced to a standing wedding suit", and a stylised bride standing on a wedding cake, before combining the themes with one of her favourite images, the standing portrait of the future Philip IV of Spain by Rodrigo de Villandrando (c 1620).

"Working, as I do, on unstretched canvas," says Wylie, "allows for any extension I feel like. I painted the groom first and then had to fit the bride's face to the one I'd given Philip. What I call my Dürer woodcut look. You can see her face was a bother to do - there are many hidden versions under the collage bit."

Wylie's work is best understood in the context of conventional art history, which she studied at the Royal College of Art from 1979 to 1981, because her art is, like most art, about art. She paints as an escapee from the academy, who has returned to untaughtness in an effort to recapture spontaneity, though everything she does is the tribute of a wayward pupil to that academy. When she paints a figure and labels it "in the manner of Signorelli", it may look to the untrained eye nothing like Signorelli, but someone who knows what makes

Signorelli different from other members of the Tuscan school will get what she means. Wylie's grasp of composition is complete, which is why she will often alter the shape of the canvas; it is also surreptitious. When I visited her in Kent, I asked her whether she was consciously rebellious. She slightly pulled a face and said: "Not consciously." We both laughed. We talked about ageing, about how ageing frees the inner girl, and how bad that girl can be. There is anger in her work, anger about the kind of art teaching that makes most kids give up making art, or turns their individual ways of seeing into A-levels.

Everybody in the art world knows Wylie, but nobody knows what to do with her. She regularly sends off works to collective shows and commercial galleries. She has sent paintings to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition every year since 1992. When a curator has had the daring to mount vast displays of Wylie's work, covering walls and floor, its impressiveness has been recognised; but, when the show is over, the canvases have been sent home to Kent. Materials are expensive. Wylie has to work to support her painting, and there is nothing left to pay for storage. One electrical short and the cottage could burn to the ground in minutes.

Life may be about to change for Wylie. Word has got out that she is seriously cool. Sisters Savannah and Sienna Miller, who together are fashion label Twenty8Twelve, have chosen her as guest artist for their current season. A Wylie drawing will feature on a Twenty8Twelve T-shirt that will sell worldwide, and associated drawings will soon be showing in their London store. Charles Saatchi didn't really get what Wylie was about, so she is still eminently collectible. I bought a drawing when I visited. If you haven't got space for something seven feet by 10, there are hundreds of other drawings to choose from - but you'd better be quick.