



Evidence of Jonathan's love for nature and art lie strewn all about his studio.

Scottish wildcat.

butts since photography wasn't very good, but now there are millions of people taking wonderful photographs. There are some fabulous photographs and films of the natural world, so painting has to ask; where are we now, where are we as painters?"

The belief that Jonathan has in art as a whole is quite a remarkable thing to behold – and is extremely infectious. I have never been a capable artist; my parents never stuck any of my paintings on the fridge – though that may be something to do with the lack of fridge magnets in our household, and the fridge itself being hidden away in the pantry – however spending a few short hours with someone so impassioned and knowledgeable has, if not inspired me to pick up a paint brush, at least encouraged me to take a keener interest in art.

I ask Jonathan why he paints: "When I was younger it was my means of expression – now it's the only thing that I can do. It's become even more important to me because it gives me individuality; I've got an awful lot that I want to say, and it's a means by which I can do it; it gives me freedom."

A key feature of Jonathan's oil paintings is that he rarely paints landscapes in which to set his subjects, instead there will often be a branch, keeping the viewer's focus upon the animal. Jonathan explains: "When the picture is small and you're painting a landscape, by its nature you can't illustrate it – you can only imply the feeling of the day and the feeling that surrounds it. It looks real, but it isn't – and there's no way it can be at that stage.

"If you've got a large landscape, however, you're being drawn towards having to make a very strong statement of saying, I am going to abstract what's there and not illustrate it, or I am going to illustrate it. Sometimes they're the sort of comments you don't want to make, or they're not what you want the viewer to concentrate on. What I want the viewers to concentrate on is the animals; I don't want you to look at the fact that they're on grass – similarly I don't want you to be distracted by the distant hills.

"That's something else painters can do – I can simply say, I'm not going to paint it. You'll notice on some of my pictures that that's exactly how I do it – there isn't anything else; no landscape. The only thing I might imply is the light, coming in from one

side for example, but I don't wish you to look at anything else.

"I really like branches because they're like a little microcosm and they get rid of the landscape – I don't want you to look at anything but the birds. So you get this thing whereby you remove the landscape and you get this microclimate to look into and explore."

Having already established that Jonathan is not a keen sportsman and seeing his knowledge and fervour for birds, a worrying thought had become lodged at the back of my mind. This thought began to nag even more when I noticed that he keeps a feathered companion in his studio – could this articulate, entertaining man be a part of the brigade of bird-worriers who descend upon the countryside every weekend with telescope and notebook in hand? Jonathan quickly put my mind at ease: "I can't think of anything more boring than going off to Orkney to look at a yellow-striped tit – it sounds absolutely dreary. It's got nothing to do with what I really want to paint about; I want to paint about our everyday experience.

"I go out for a walk every morning and I'll pass roe deer, hares and herons, and I'm just as interested in the plants and the trees and the time of year – that is our experience. For those twitchers, their experience is standing alongside a lot of other lenses, looking at a bird that's probably gotten lost and is going to die of fright anyway. That's a sadness – why would I want to paint a sadness like that?

"People who shoot have an appreciation of nature. I used to shoot as a boy, I don't really shoot now – but I went on a walked-up weekend in January because it's quite good to kill something – it connects you with the earth. I used to be a vegetarian, but all I could think about was bacon and roast mutton; it disconnects you from the earth completely.

"If you realise what you're killing and eating, you have a greater love of it – there's a dependency there, but also an appreciation. Every time you pull the trigger and something drops down dead, there is a slight sense of loss – but alongside that there is the appreciation that you've got something to eat,

and you wonder if you'll get the next one – that's where you come up against your true self."

Jonathan's passion is truly borne out by his work – many of his subjects look out of the painting at the viewer, giving you a presence and place in the picture and reminding us that nature is always watching us. It is no surprise that many of his works are sought after by those with an interest in country sports.

However, it seems unlikely that any artist could rely solely upon the sporting community for survival, particularly when there is so much competition. Jonathan has equally strong views on the market as he does on his subject: "You'd think that in today's age there would be an interest in wildlife art, that it would be absolutely at the top of the tree – particularly as the environment is such a pressing issue currently – but it isn't; it's almost where it was way back in the 1880s, when art was just beginning to make a name for itself for art's sake, rather than being paintings of battles, of families, great historical moments and religious paintings.

At the bottom of the tree at this time was wildlife and botanical art – it's still at the bottom now, and it shouldn't be there.

"Some of that is the artists' fault; I do think that everybody likes a nice painting of a dog or a pretty scene, and it's too easy to just keep turning those out. There's too many artists doing it really – you've got to start doing something more. And I think we need to start demanding our space a bit more too – letting people know that, actually, we have something to say.

"I personally don't worry about it, because I think I produce different work – I've always been on the outside of it all, making my own tracts, so I'm not worried for myself. I do think that there is a problem with over-saturation of the market, but a bigger problem is the quality of what's being painted.

"There's a lot of people who love their sports, and if they see a painting that triggers a memory for them which they can get at a price they want, then that's fine – but the world evolves and people and art changes. What is required is critical evaluation, to

guide discerning purchasers towards works of long-term value."

Having explored such a wide variety of themes over a long and illustrious career, and an ability to paint in a number of different styles with a wide variety of materials, I ask Jonathan where his future lies, and if he would ever consider moving away from his chosen subject: "I'm always trying to perfect my skill; I'm always wanting to paint a better picture; as soon as I've finished one picture I want to get on with another one, and do a better one than the one before. Hopefully I can always improve my technical ability.

"Someone once asked me if I would like to go to Africa and paint elephants. I'm not remotely interested in that; I don't know it. With the pictures I paint, I have absolute knowledge; I know exactly what's growing in the ground; I know exactly what time of year it's going to come out; I understand the sequence, and how the sequence gets changed by the seasons – I am absolutely connected to the soil of Britain, and I know it inside out. I don't

go looking for anything that isn't common to us all. There's an enormous joy in nature; that's what I love.

"If I went to Africa, what would I be taking to it? I don't know anything about it, I don't understand the ground, the seasons, the herbage, I don't understand what they're eating, how they live, and their lifecycle. I can do an intellectual painting about an unfamiliar subject if I want to make a statement, but I couldn't reflect their environment unless I really knew it. There's enough to keep me going for the rest of my life here.

"I believe in painting; I believe it's a really, truly important art because it's a fixed mark. My paintings haven't changed, but I've changed. I will view a picture differently each time I see it over the years, and that's a great thing – you'll be a different person when you see it aged 15, 50 or 80!"

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Jonathan will be displaying his works at the CLA Game Fair. For more information visit www.jonathansainsbury.com