



Gallery of the month: The Great Atlantic Gallery, St Just

Words by **Alex Wade** photographs by **Mike Newman**

Rock-climbing and art would seem to make for an unusual pair of bedfellows, but the two are conjoined in the ebullient form of Michael Jay, co-owner of The Great Atlantic Gallery in St Just. Indeed, it was his passion for climbing that led the Welshman to West Penwith; he has now been here for 20 years.

Jay's taste for adventure also led him to mountaineering expeditions in the American West, but the wild landscape of the far west of Cornwall was what ultimately captivated this confessedly restless man. "My lifestyle is of the never-stand-still variety," admits Jay, who studied geology at the University of London, "but I'm glad to have settled here."

A hint of the nomadic energy that has characterised his life is still evident. There is a Great Atlantic in Falmouth, and one in Monmouth, too, not to mention a programme of travelling Art Road Shows.

This month will see Jay anchored in Cornwall, thanks to a show devoted to three artists whom he describes as "rising stars" - step forward Mark Spray, Eric Pentecost and Catherine Harvey Jefferson.

Jay is as down to earth as he is enthusiastic about the trio. "In Cornwall, every other house has an artist, and every week another few get off the train. In such a crowded marketplace, we're always trying to find artists who are different, who are devoted to their work and in it for the long haul. Mark, Eric and Catherine fit those criteria."

A glance at Jefferson's work, for example, provides ready congruity with Jay's sense of the world. A graduate of Falmouth and Winchester Schools of Art, Jefferson paints en plein air, with her inspiration coming from the rugged landscape of places such as the Cot Valley, Porthgwarra and Pendeen Watch. Her vibrant oil paintings are borne of the



OPPOSITE PAGE: CATHERINE HARVEY JEFFERSON, MIKE JAY, ERIC PENTECOST LEFT: MARK SPRAY AND DOG IN HIS STUDIO TOP: ERIC WITH HIS PAINTINGS ABOVE: CATHERINE HARVEY JEFFERSON AT ST JUST

energy of her surroundings.

Eric Pentecost, meanwhile, reveals a more considered, intimate relationship with the area. Similarly inspired by West Penwith, Trewellard resident Pentecost says he loves "to get into the detail and colour of what I'm painting".

Meanwhile, Mark Spray – whose studio is in St Just – has produced a body of work called *Unearth*, whose textural emphasis includes earth from its locus, the Penwith moorland. All three artists meet Jay's high standards, and are deliberately exhibited in the company of 20th century masters.

"When I put on shows, the artists will invariably be accompanied by printed works by major figures such as Matisse, Hockney and Chagall, and so it will be for the show featuring Mark, Eric and Catherine."

Jay is a well-known figure in the Cornish art world, and runs Cornwall's two Great Atlantic galleries with his wife,

Hayley. Their plans for 2008 are "to have a continually evolving programme that changes every three weeks," with each show featuring some of the best new artists in Cornwall and, indeed, beyond.

Jay also exhibits the work of Lancashire artist John Thompson, a man who did not become a full-time professional painter until his 50s but who now, in his 80s, finds himself readily compared to the likes of LS Lowry, Theodore Major and Harold Riley.

Spray, Pentecost and Jefferson will hope for similar good fortune, and backed by Michael Jay, they might just find that it arrives rather earlier in their lives. 🍀

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