

A LIFE IN COLOUR

Norman Gilbert pictured in 2018 at his exhibition, *Passion, Vision and Spirit II*, at Tatha Gallery, Newport-on-Tay.



Bursting with vibrancy and colour, the works of the late Scottish painter Norman Gilbert are a joy to behold. **Jennifer McLaren** discovers more

The vivid, pattern-rich works of Norman Gilbert provide a welcome escape from the unsettled times in which we are living.

Norman, who worked from his Glasgow studio, sadly passed away in December 2019 at the age of 93. He had spent a lifetime doing something he loved – although the path hadn't always been easy.

Tatha Gallery in Newport-on-Tay is hosting its third exhibition of Norman's works – *A Life in Colour* – a show made all the more poignant by the fact that co-owners Lindsay Bennett and Helen Glassford began planning it before his passing. The exhibition runs until November 7.

"We felt like one of his family when we went to visit," explains Lindsay. "You were welcomed – you'd stay for lunch... we would sit there and chat in the studio or his front room. It was a special relationship that was built up very quickly. We have never experienced that with an artist before."

Norman's relationship with Tatha was a short one in terms of his prolific career as an artist. But it created new audiences and buyers for his works, finally giving him the recognition he so richly deserved.

Lindsay goes on: "I think he treasured it as well because it was opening up his eyes to works that he had forgotten about – or had done so long ago."

The 29 paintings on show at Tatha are a testament to the care and dedication he showed to his subject and ideas. They are also a celebration of Norman – a gentle and humble man.

Spanning six decades from 1959 to 2019, the works were all kept at Norman's studio prior to going on display.

Lindsay says: "We used to go to the studio to pick works and he would think: 'I'm not sure why they're taking that one,' but then they would appear in the gallery and they were just stunning."

Norman's paintings depict his family and friends. The models have changed over time as his four sons were born, grew up, formed relationships, and have had children of their own. His wife, Pat, was a retired art teacher. She died in 2016.

Lindsay adds: "It was his family life through the ages – like a photograph album on a wall. In a way, there's a poignancy in that, latterly – when his wife died and the boys all went their own ways – he was in the house on his own so it then became plants and patterns."

Norman produced his final works last year and one remains unfinished on his easel. Three of his 2019 still life paintings are included in the exhibition.

He would normally make preparatory sketches on paper, then produce a black and white version on board with Indian ink before creating a final colour version with oils on board.

The paintings are prepared meticulously. The oil paint is applied to a traditional, semi-absorbent chalk ground on rigid board, which best maintains the colour and the permanence of the pigment.

Norman once said of his work: "I try to make each colour and shape enhance every other colour and shape so it's entirely satisfactory, so it's at peace."

His journey to becoming a recognised artist is a tale of perseverance and passion. His story

went viral after BBC Scotland made a short arts film about his career and it was viewed millions of times around the world.

Born to Scottish parents in Trinidad in 1926, he moved to Glasgow as a young boy. He attended Glasgow School of Art (GSA) but was kicked out for being "un-teachable". Even as a student, Norman was well on the way to developing his own, unique style – something that appeared to jar with the establishment.

He finally got his diploma from GSA in 1963 and created works alongside various roles such as looking after pigs on a farm, being a scenery painter and an art teacher.

Norman's son Mark is an artist and an academic at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada. In an essay written for the exhibition's catalogue – entitled *What a life. What a gift* – he describes his father as "a dedicated, passionate and wonderful artist" and says his "pictures are a tender and affectionate testament to his life and the relationships that nourished him."

Mark often reflects on how the family sometimes took the pictures and the act of sitting for him for granted: "As a child, the moment he announced he'd finished his drawing, I'd turn and dash from the studio before he could change his mind."

In 2016, during Pat's final days in hospital, Norman kept a bedside vigil, sketching her to quiet his mind. Mark says: "They taught me more than anything else about the healing power of art. He cherished these drawings and the memories they generated about mum, who had done so much to support him over the years."

The drawings, which "transformed his own deeply private experience into shared depictions of love, caregiving, end of life and bereavement" can now be seen in the book *Pat, End of Life Drawings* by Norman Gilbert.