

ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

British artist Emily Ponsonby's newest exhibition was a year in the making, but the wait is now over

In her forthcoming solo exhibition at London's Gillian Jason Gallery, Emily Ponsonby explores the extraordinary in the ordinary – the overlooked details of familiar objects that time and routine so often dull. Raised on a farm in the Cotswolds and now living near the Dorset coast, Ponsonby's practice transports viewers to a world where stories unfold unhurriedly with the alchemy of beeswax.



My Heart Bleeds for You, 2025, beeswax and oil on panel, 140 x 110cm

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME AN ARTIST?

My grandfather was an extraordinary doodler. He would write me letters without words – only pictures. He planted the seed, and from that moment on, drawing and painting became my way of communicating.

WHAT DO YOU WANT YOUR WORK TO EXPLORE?

My paintings are almost like a retrospective diary, recording a year's worth of encounters – recreating the places and faces that bring me comfort. I have to paint people I know. It's through hearing their voices, understanding how they think, even recognising their scent, that I can bring a narrative to life. With every figure, I aim to capture not just likeness, but presence. My scenes are not filled with protagonists, but with the threads of relationships. My paintings are not only what the eye sees, but what the heart feels – the invisible warmth between people as they share bread, time, and stories.

WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST INFLUENCES, AND HOW DO THESE COME OUT IN YOUR WORK?

I moved to rural Dorset in the middle of Storm Eunice and found myself in a village of painters, printmakers, sculptors, carpenters, and writers. I live the reality of my paintings. I sketch the people I share my everyday life with; the work is drawn from the hedgerows we walk, the beans that have just ripened, and the conversations we've had about love, life, and the land. Like the waves rolling in a few miles away, the creative process here is wonderfully circular. A friend might photograph me in the studio, seated in front of a canvas – a canvas that bears the face of that same photographer, cigarette balanced in his mouth, gently podding a broad bean. I like to leave clues to what sparks their joy: perhaps a scrap of paper by their arm with their latest project scrawled across it.

WHY DO YOU USE BEESWAX IN YOUR WORK?

I was raised as a beekeeper's daughter, so my experiments with beeswax began early. Its milky translucency and malleability captivated me, and discovering it as a medium changed the way I approached painting. I began to value the foundation of a work as much as the image on its surface.

Over the past 14 years, I have developed an encaustic technique: melting and brushing beeswax mixed with pigment onto wooden panels, then sculpting back into the layers before drawing the image to the surface. For a time, I used a syrup-coloured beeswax. While beautiful, it made creating subtle skin tones difficult, so I switched to a lighter, creamier wax from bees feeding on heather and lavender. This not only allows for greater tonal precision but also gives the paintings a warm, gentle glow. In many works, the brightest whites you see on the surface are actually the beeswax itself, quietly glowing from beneath the paint.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR LATEST COLLECTION.

The collection took a year to complete, with days that often began at 10 AM and stretched into the early hours of the morning. I work best late at night and early in the day, keeping a disciplined rhythm for what is, by nature, a slow and gentle process – applying, removing, applying again – building layer upon layer before digging back into them. As painter Andrew Cranston said, "A painting must always be five minutes away from the edge of the skip." I agree with that. Many works have ended up in the wood burner during their development. It's a good thing: that stage of push, pull, and play is essential. I begin by drawing thumbnails of every piece to see how they sit together as a whole. Then I make monoprints from my sketches to loosen my hand and experiment with colour and composition. Only then does the painting truly begin.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE ARTWORK IN YOUR NEW COLLECTION?

'The Chess Players' – because its surface holds so many stories of how it came to be. It took two friends and my brother, all sitting together, quietly wrinkling and cooling in the bath. Another friend taught me how to play chess, and a kind client lent us her bath on a cold Friday afternoon in early January.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT SO FAR AS AN ARTIST?

The moments that mean the most are receiving emails from clients telling me how a work has helped them through a difficult time. The whole point of me painting is to set my work free into the world, hoping it will soothe someone as it has soothed me.

Secondly, last year, 'Chewing the Cud' hung in the National Portrait Gallery as part of the Herbert Smith Freehills Award. It was wildly exciting to see it under the same roof as some of the paintings that first inspired me to become an artist.

WHAT IS THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN AS AN ARTIST?

A conversation between Maggi Hambling and artist Arthur Lett-Haines stays with me every day in the studio. Lett-Haines told Hambling: "You must make your work your best friend... you must go to it with whatever you are feeling; you're tired, you're bored, you're happy, you're randy... whatever it is, go to your work." It dissolves the idea that there's a perfect or fixed time to create. Every moment is the right moment, and the surface of the painting is there to listen, to hold, and to untangle the day's thoughts.

IF YOU COULD OWN ONE PIECE OF ART, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

'Combing the Hair' by Degas. It holds such form and weight within a brilliant composition, yet the brushstrokes feel as though they were applied effortlessly – stroked with a lightness of touch that makes me catch my breath.

Ponsonby's latest exhibition will run from September 11 to October 19
Visit www.gillianjason.com for more information.