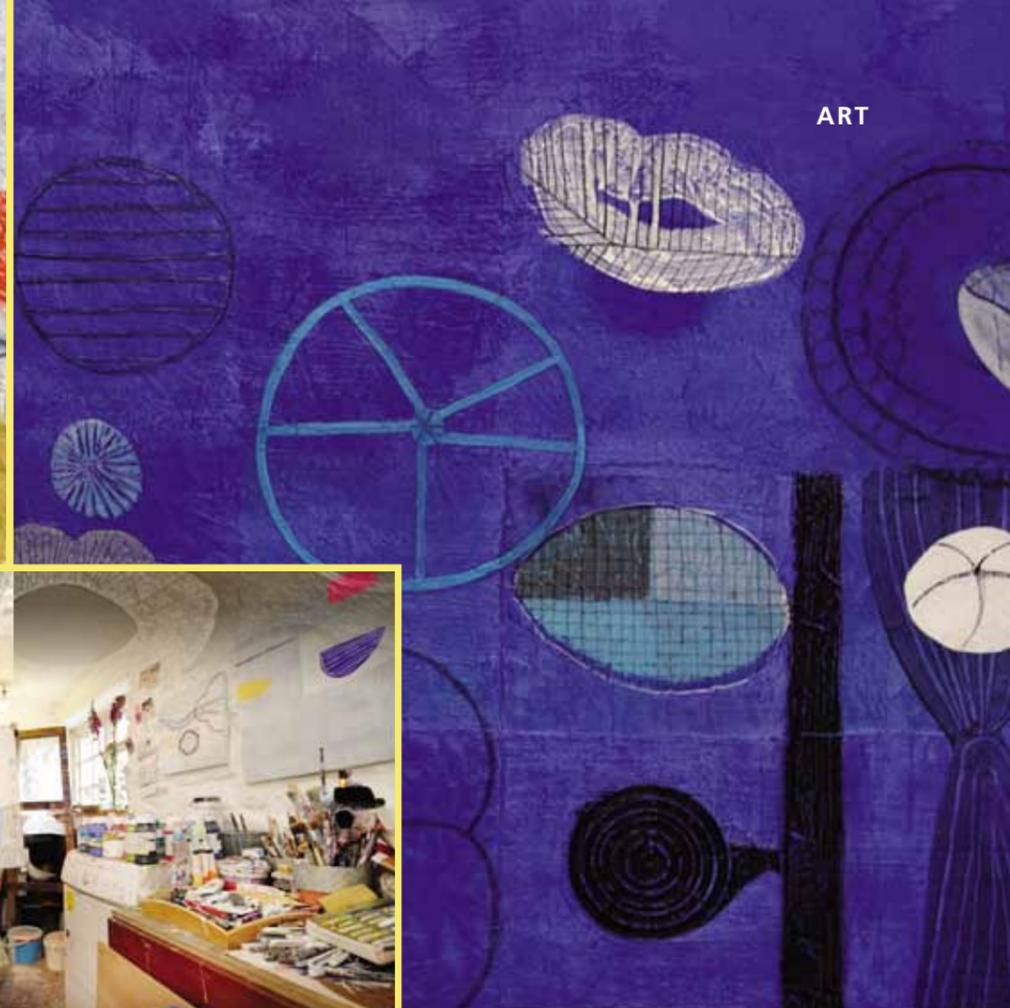


# From Blaina to Botallack

MAGGIE MATTHEWS HAILS FROM THE WELSH VALLEYS. SHE'S NOW ROOTED IN WEST PENWITH – AND ONE OF CORNWALL'S BEST ARTISTS →

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman/www.ocean-image.com**





Despite hailing from the edge of the landlocked Brecon Beacons in Wales, Maggie Matthews loves the sea as if she had spent all her life living on the coast. She has a theory to explain a passion which has seen her spend her adult years swimming and surfing, walking the beaches of west Cornwall and gathering pebbles, rocks and other pieces of wreck from the shoreline, or just gazing at the expanse of the sea and its infinite horizon – experiences which are all integral to her art.

“My grandfather was in the Royal Navy in Plymouth,” says Maggie, a dark-haired woman with light brown eyes who has lived in Botallack, in West Penwith, for over two decades. “During the Second World War Devonport was heavily bombed and one night the family had to take cover in an Anderson shelter. When they returned to their house, they found what my mother described as a pile of matchsticks. After that mum was evacuated to Wales, but just think: if things had been different I could so easily have been born in Cornwall. So many other children were evacuated here.”

What might have been – an existence by the sea – became reality after Maggie had completed an Art degree at Exeter University. Unhesitatingly, she says that moving to Cornwall changed her life, and while also admits that her early years were “pretty insular” they nevertheless had similarities to the life she would make for herself in the far west.

“I was born and bred in a small mining village called Blaina,” says Maggie. “It had rows and rows of tiny terraced cottages, just like so many Cornish villages and towns. Life was impoverished for many people. The idea of me being an artist was inconceivable to my mother.”

But as a child Maggie was always making things. “I’d keep myself busy with craft kits, or dig up an exposed vein of clay behind the house and sculpt it into something. Anything, so long as I could be creative.” Her drive led to ‘A’ levels in ceramics, art and geology; she was fortunate to have teachers who were able to persuade her mother that Maggie’s love of art could turn into something tangible. Hearing lectures on art in places like Cardiff and Newport, where she took a Foundation course at the College of Art and Design, further cemented Maggie’s resolve to do something different, so she took herself to Exeter University.

There, studying art, Maggie would often head to the coast – especially the pretty town of Dawlish – on weekends. Then came trips to Cornwall thanks to the Geology Society: “If there were spaces in the club’s van, anyone could jump in, so I found myself discovering places like the Cot Valley in West Penwith. I couldn’t believe what I found. It was love at first sight.”

Upon graduating Maggie settled in Penzance. She shared her first house with a man known by his friends, for obscure reasons, as ‘Tup’; CT readers know him rather better as Mike Newman, photographer and surfer. “It was thanks to Tup that I learnt to drive,” chuckles Maggie. “After that first house, in Bread Street, we shared another a little later, in Sennen Cove. By then I was a keen surfer. The deal with Tup was that if I’d take him and his friends surfing, he’d teach me to drive. We went all over the place, thanks to that arrangement.”

In Penzance, Maggie did not immediately start work as an artist, instead taking a job in desktop publishing for a company called Garbo Systems. This she did for four years, by the end of which she was hooked on surfing. This in turn led to a trip to Australia

with some girlfriends – perhaps the same crew as became known as the ‘Sponge Betty Surf Club’. What is more certain is that back in Britain Maggie married the sculptor and surfboard shaper Jonty Henshall. The pair subsequently separated, but had a daughter, Emily, and, says Maggie, now “get on brilliantly as friends”.

All the while – whether at Garbo Systems, living in shared houses with Mike Newman or while married to Henshall – Maggie was painting. An early show at the Rainyday Gallery did well, as did others in its wake at places like Archie Brown’s café in Penzance (“they’ve always been really supportive of the local art scene”), the Great Atlantic in St Just and the Avalon Gallery in Marazion. By the time Emily was two, Maggie was able to think seriously about working full-time as an artist; before long, that was exactly what she was doing. “Everything just snowballed,” she says.

Today, Maggie’s work is to be found in a number of galleries and collections. In 1999, BBC Wales Broadcasting Studio commissioned a number of paintings to be displayed during broadcasts, and Maggie has also exhibited as far afield as Nantucket and New York. Closer to home, she has shown many times in London.

Each year, Maggie spends time on the Scilly island of Tresco – “one of the most beautiful places I know” – and has recently completed a commission for Gallery Tresco. A large solo show at Cornwall Contemporary starts on August 17, and Maggie also shows her work at a number of art fairs. One of her paintings even illumines the front cover of the rather impenetrable text of *Modern Literary Theory*, a collection of essays by the likes of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault; another is on the cover

of *Researching Human Geography*. Rather more accessible are greeting cards featuring her work.

That Maggie should have become so popular is not merely down to her undeniably admirable sense of industry (she works 9 to 5 each day, then, after supper at 6pm, often takes herself back to her studio to continue work). Her paintings are wonderfully vivacious, and yet still and reflective. There are traces of Bonnard, Vuillard and Patrick Heron; Peter Lanyon too, with her work rooted first and foremost in the experience of sea and coast. Rock, pebble and shell forms float, apparently disconnectedly, against the blended colours of Cornwall – sometimes turquoise, others pink or light grey, and always deftly, subtly executed. And yet there is a sense of harmony to the whole, something which is also, at times, sensual and sultry.

Roland Barthes, in his essay *The Death of the Author* – which is featured in *Modern Literary Theory* – writes that “Mallarmé’s entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing”. There are but a few people who might claim to understand what Barthes means, but if you’re not one of them, don’t worry. Just take a look at *Coming Ashore*, Maggie’s painting which adorns the book. It makes a lot more sense, and that’s the thing about the girl from Blaina: what she creates is warm, attractive and vibrant. It makes sense, and deserves every bit of its still-rising popularity. 

*Up Close, Maggie Matthews’ next show, runs from August 17 to September 10 at Cornwall Contemporary, 1 Parade Street, Penzance, TR18 4BU. Tel 01736 874749, visit [www.cornwallcontemporary.com](http://www.cornwallcontemporary.com). See also [www.maggiemattthews.co.uk](http://www.maggiemattthews.co.uk)*