

A man with a beard and a dark cap is shown in profile, focused on sketching on a large sheet of paper mounted on a wooden board. He is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt. The background is a blurred view of a boat's deck and rigging, suggesting he is on a yacht. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Art & soul

We meet Alexander Creswell, the artist who puts the water back into watercolour
Hugo Andreae



Anyone taking part in last year's Antigua Classics race week will have witnessed a most unusual spectacle. In amongst the billowing sails and thundering spray of the thoroughbred yachts, a small spectator boat ducked and dived, snapping at their heels like a terrier keeping pace with a pack of race horses.

Perched in the open bow section of this chase boat, with a curious wooden easel strapped to his thigh and a sodden stick of charcoal between his fingers, sat a lone figure sketching on the spray-flecked paper as if his life depended on it. His name is Alex Creswell, one of the world's greatest living watercolourists. Best known for his evocative paintings of historic buildings, including a series of watercolours of the fire and subsequent restoration of Windsor Castle, he has recently turned his attention away from architecture towards the high-adrenaline world of classic superyacht regattas.

The first exhibition of his maritime work, entitled *Chasing the Breeze*, was a sell out, and already his paintings are hanging on the bulkheads of some of the world's best-known superyachts. The 60-metre Benetti *Xanadu* alone is said to have 12 Creswells adorning its lavish interior, while other collectors include the designer Andrew Winch and a superyacht-owning rock star whom Creswell is far too discreet to name. Then again when your patrons include the Queen and the Prince of Wales, it's hardly surprising that Creswell is protective of his clients' privacy.

Back in the relative calm of his studio, in the attic of his rambling arts-and-crafts country house, Creswell is surrounded by the evidence of his recent Antigua trip. The cupboards, walls, floor and even the ceiling are strewn with charcoal sketches, many pinned to the plasterboard in continuous 3m strips like sequential frames from a giant reel of celluloid. The metaphor is no coincidence; Alex uses paper as photographers use film, wrapping ten-metre strips of it around a pair of wooden scrolls, then loading it into his leg-mounted easel so that he can dash out a drawing, roll it into the waterproof

Facing page: Alex Creswell puts his home-made drawing machine through its paces during Antigua Classics week.

Below: The artist dashes off a watercolour sketch in his studio to demonstrate his free-flowing techniques.



Photos: Vanessa Hall & Graham Snook

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box and start on the next one. But a photographer uses the unfeeling lens of a camera to record the scene; Creswell uses his eyes and hands to interpret the spectacle. It is, he maintains, one of the key reasons that his paintings are so full of life.

“A camera has one eye not two, so it has no appreciation of distance and volume,” explains Creswell. “If I took photographs of the boats and recreated them as paintings in the studio, they’d already be second hand. The colours, light and perspective would be distorted by what the camera can and can’t see. Using sketches I can capture the key elements on paper and recreate the rest from memory. I don’t mind if the finished painting is less accurate provided it captures the feeling.”

It doesn’t take an art critic to see how well he has succeeded in his goal. Creswell’s watercolours exude atmosphere. From the light filtering through the canvas sails to the spray licking off the rails, you can taste the salt in the air as these racing heavyweights strain every sinew to be first past the mark. Rather less obvious is how an artist who made his name painting the quiet solitude of deserted country houses made the transition to the tumultuous world of classic superyacht racing.

It was, he claims, a genuine Damascene moment. “I was relaxing on holiday in Cornwall when I was invited to go out in a friend’s RIB and watch some traditional superyachts racing off Falmouth. Speeding along beside them I realised that much of what had driven me in architecture was here manifest in mahogany, canvas and brass rather than in stone. I *had* to paint these fabulous yachts.”

Despite the complexity of the subject matter and the issue of capturing this fleeting action from the spray-spattered decks of a chase boat, Creswell rose to the challenge. He designed his own

thigh-mounted easel and had it made by a friend, first in wood and latterly in carbon fibre to make it lighter and more waterproof.

This never-say-die approach is symptomatic of the man himself. Trained in the history of art and architecture rather than painting, his skills are entirely self-taught. After a frustrating period working for galleries and as a framer, he abandoned the security of a comfortable life in London to explore the Mediterranean on a 36ft wooden ketch. His romantic notion of painting his way around Southern Europe, selling his art as he went, didn’t work out as smoothly as he’d hoped but it did give him a grounding in the ways of the sea and the workings of a classic wooden sailing yacht.

His big break came in 1991 with an exhibition, subsequently published in book form, entitled the *Silent Houses of Britain*. Creswell had spent five years touring the country sketching and painting dozens of historic houses, which had fallen into disrepair. The splendour and opulence of a bygone era had been replaced by fallen beams and crumbling masonry, but here Creswell found his subject matter. The remarkable series of watercolours that followed made a huge impact in the spheres of art and architecture.

News of his talent spread fast, attracting the eye of the Prince of Wales. When a faulty spotlight at Windsor Castle set fire to a curtain in November 1992, starting a blaze that wrecked many of its most historic rooms, it was Creswell who was asked by the Queen to capture the tragic consequences, as well as the meticulous restoration that followed.

Although he has not turned his back on architecture, classic yachts have ignited a deep-seated passion and provided fresh inspiration for his art. His eyes light up when he describes the epic battles being played out on the water and his hands involuntarily start to sketch out the scene in thin air. “The power of the sails, the bow wave, the trailing sheets...” intones Creswell, motioning wildly with his right hand. “It’s an exhilaration of action and beauty that thrills the soul.”



Top: Creswell in the thick of the action trying to capture the moment on paper.
Above: Sable brushes are the tools of his trade.
Right: A new work of art begins to take shape on the artist’s studio easel.



Left: The finished article showing Velsheda, Ranger and Eleonora battling it out.
Below: The foaming wave crests are scratched into the paper with a scalpel.
Bottom: A spattered paint box bears witness to Creswell's dynamism.



With that, he puts the painting he's been working on to one side and grabs a fresh sheet of sketch paper. With a fluid ease that comes from years of practice he prescribes a perfect arc on the virgin paper that quickly becomes the heavily canted rail of a close-hauled yacht powering into a stiff breeze off its port bow. The sails start to take shape, and the rigging follows in hand-drawn lines so straight that you can feel the tension in the shrouds. It's mesmerising to watch such skill at work but the best is yet to come. After a few more strokes he lays down the stick of charcoal and picks up one of his tapered sable brushes before rummaging in the drawers of his oak specimen chest for a handful of watercolour paints. With the intensity of an alchemist he mixes the seemingly discordant colours, dabbing his brush into a cup of water filled from the paint-spattered sink in the corner of his studio. When he's happy the hue is just right he turns back to the easel and starts painting the sea, varying the shades with minute changes of depth and intensity, creating each wave and ripple.

"Some people still think of watercolour as an inferior medium to oil," muses Creswell. "Actually, it's much more challenging. If you make a mistake in oil you can scrape that section off and start again. With watercolours you have to get it right first time. And watercolours appeal to me because they are translucent. How can you paint light in a solid medium like oil? It's all about the light."

Even in this hastily thrown-together sketch you can see how important light is to his art, whether its sunbeams breaking through patchy cloud or the shadows cast on the surface of the sea by the looming spectre of a backlit sail.

"Boats have light and form but they also have movement. They are like great cathedrals moving

across the water," says Creswell, scraping at the paper with a scalpel. "You can't paint white in watercolour so you have to scratch back the paint to the paper beneath," he explains sensing my disquiet.

Sure enough, the seemingly destructive scratching soon takes the form of a breaking wave curling off the bow of an imaginary yacht. It's one thing to take a knife to a hastily painted sketch but it's a measure of his confidence that he is just as happy to scratch away at one of his full-scale paintings, which may have taken weeks to get this far. Only when he's totally happy with the finished result will he send it away for framing ready to be exhibited, usually with a five-figure price attached.

He personally prepares all his paper, soaking it in the bath then pinning it out on his easel. For his largest paintings he even had an easel made from the frame of an old chiropractic bed that doubles as his dining room table when not in use. The paper is hand made in a special mill with a thick texture that absorbs the colour but makes detail hard to add. Instead, he has to paint the more elusive but arguably more evocative spirit of the yachts.

It is, he says, immensely liberating to have no option but to capture the moment. "You can't go back and revisit the scene as you can with a building. I have to sketch the action as fast as I can and record the scene in my own mind. It brings an immediacy to the painting that would be lost if I focused too hard on the details."

The end results speak for themselves to the point where superyacht owners and designers are increasingly coming to him with commissions. As for Creswell, he's already seeking his next challenge, hoping that one day he'll get the chance to cross the Atlantic on one of the classic yachts he derives so much pleasure from painting.

"Think of the series I could do painting the seas in all its states and shades as we sailed across the vast expanse of an ocean," he enthuses, already lost in the vision he has created. Given Creswell's ability to make things happen, it's only a matter of time before an invitation is forthcoming. **SYW**

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