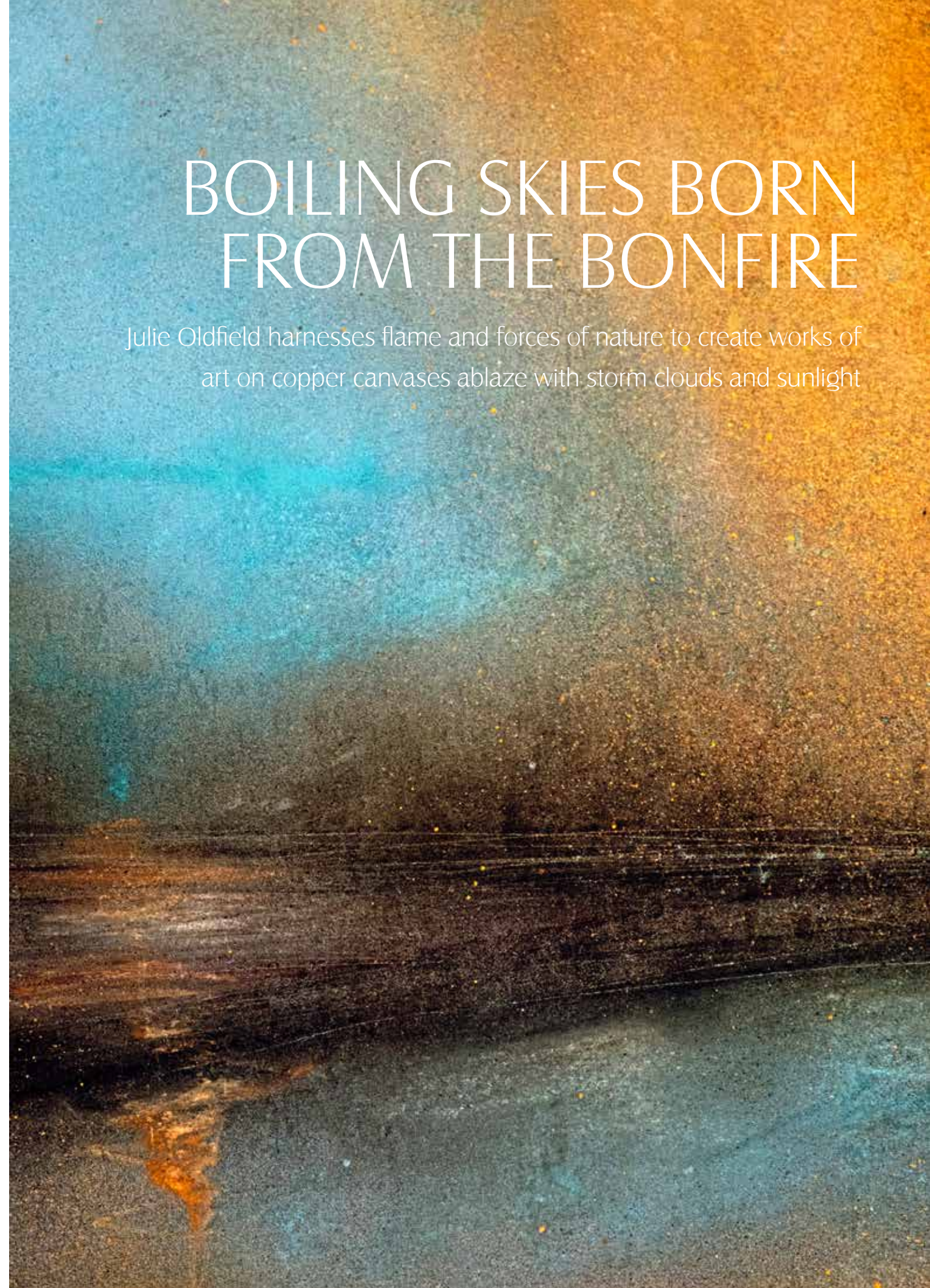




BOILING SKIES BORN FROM THE BONFIRE

Julie Oldfield harnesses flame and forces of nature to create works of art on copper canvases ablaze with storm clouds and sunlight



IT IS ONE of those crisp, blue-sky November days. A lone dog walker ambles along the almost empty beach at Lyme Regis, watched by a hopeful, solitary gull. There is only one other person on the beach today, and they are doing something that seems rather peculiar. Grappling with a huge sheet of copper, Julie Oldfield heaves it towards a driftwood bonfire and throws it on, manoeuvring the metal into position. She pauses, watching as the flames lick the copper. It is a scene that raises questions.

Julie is an artist with a difference. Having studied environmental design, her younger years were spent as a commercial designer working across six continents, but, in the 1990s, tired of the 'rat race', she decided to return to her first love and became a professional artist. It was a leap of faith that paid off, and her viscerally elemental artwork is now admired and sought after.

Having grown up on a farm, Julie originally started painting watercolour cows on canvas, working with traditional methods. In 1996, she opened the Blue Lias Gallery in Lyme Regis, named for the local rock type. Here, she sold her own paintings and those of other local artists, also hosting a café within the gallery.

In 2002, she sold the gallery, which enabled her to concentrate on being a full-time artist, working from her home studio. She lives in a beautiful rural location near Ware, just outside Lyme beside the Dorset-Devon border. From here she produces work that is exhibited throughout the country.

Exposed to the elements

A narrow path leads from her delightful cottage through the garden, winding on and on, past her tool shed and a pond, to a sudden and surprising expanse of lawn, where large wooden easels stand, bearing huge pieces of luminous artwork in various stages of development. The exposure is refreshingly unexpected. Open to the weather, with a stand of trees as a backdrop, and occasional llamas grazing beyond, these paintings-in-waiting are being conditioned by nature.

Julie's newly built studio stands to one side of the lawn. Inside, more enormous paintings are displayed – some hanging on the walls; others leaning in stacks against the walls. Some lie on the floor face-up, as Julie likes to work on the horizontal, as well as on easels. She explains the transition from paintings inspired by her

*"O! for a muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention"*

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

childhood on the farm to these extraordinarily profound and emotional representations of immense skies, land- and seascapes that are an intriguing combination of traditional art materials over a foundation of patinated metals.

"Approximately 15 years ago, I was walking on the beach near Lyme, and I noticed the town's old rubbish tip was falling down the cliffs; collapsing onto the beach and exposing bits of rusty metal," she says.

"I really liked the colour of this and wanted to incorporate it into my paintings of trees, so I started using sheets of metal that I had rusted, although it was hard to stop the rust developing too far."

Julie explains that she tried this technique for a while, experimenting with different metals, such as galvanised and ungalvanised steel, before turning to copper sheets. "I've always loved the colour verdigris, which you can't get with paint. I love to achieve effects

that you can't get in ordinary ways." She now works primarily with sheets of copper and brass, though she admits that she likes bronze best. "The verdigris changes into lilac-pinks, with more texture, but it's very expensive," she explains, adding that achieving the correct shade is one of the tricky parts of her work.

Then, during her artistic journey, Julie discovered fire. She explains that fire has been a major player in her life since birth. Her mother's return from the maternity hospital was delayed due to a house fire, and while growing up on the farm with her brothers and sister, there was another. "It burnt the house down and destroyed all our toys, and from then on, I got more experimental with found objects," she says.

Burning metal

It is said that many great ideas start with a mistake, and the first sheet of copper that Julie bought was ➤

Her feet rooted in the sand, artist Julie Oldfield tips a copper sheet into the flames just yards from the sea's edge in Dorset. Once the fierce heat has made its unique marks on the metal, Julie washes it down in cooling salt water on the shoreline, allowing nature to further add its effects.





Standing outdoors at her easel, Julie applies a salt and vinegar solution with a paintbrush, which reacts with the copper to produce shades of aquamarine (top). Propped against a hedge, pieces of her artwork are left to the mercy of the elements, adding to their individuality (above).

accidentally put on a garden bonfire. It was an epiphanic error, showing Julie the potential of fire as an artistic medium, bringing out the lustre of the metal and creating the suggestion of massive ‘boiling’ skies and storm clouds glowing with reflected sunlight. Her paintings emerge as dramatic as the fire from which they are born.

“I gain inspiration from my daily dog walks; looking at the coastline in all weathers and seasons; sometimes sketching the ragged, jagged Jurassic coast, where the sea meets the land,” she says. “The roar of the waves and contrast of the stillness is unpredictable, and this is what I like to capture on my metal sheets.

“But also, when I’m walking along and just looking, I don’t necessarily write or sketch anything,” she adds. “When I get home, what I’ve seen is still in my head, and this comes through into the painting, without overthinking the effect I want to achieve.”

Julie sources her metal from a factory in Leicestershire, which supplies her with 3ft by 6½ft (1 × 2m) sheets. Her creations then follow an interestingly

*“All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon”*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’

unorthodox, and sometimes noisy, process, which – and this is another surprise – incorporates yoga practice at the outset.

Julie is a yoga teacher, and brings the meditative, philosophical quality of this to her paintings. “I cannot paint without doing some yoga first,” she says.

With a sheet of new metal, the bonfire process is the starting point if Julie plans to use fire for this particular piece. Not all her metal is burned – Julie never burns brass sheets, for example. “I just work with brass using its natural texture,” she says.

“I have to get help with the bonfires on the beach, as it’s such a heavy process; getting the metal sheets into the car, then out of it, and carrying them to the beach. I had a chap helping me for the last 30 years, but, very sadly, he died in 2023.”

Julie explains that a great deal of intuition is involved with the burning process to get the timing right – something that has become second nature to her, although it is also the hardest part. The fire cannot exceed 400°C, as the metal will bend and turn blue – not a desired effect. “That’s why I can’t use a blow-torch to do it,” she laughs. Some of her smaller pieces are burned in her cottage’s wood burner, however.

“Burning the copper is one of my favourite parts of the process – and also the trickiest. It’s heavy, and I’m constantly putting it on and off the fire in order to get the right effect. It’s very exhausting.”

After burning, the copper is washed – in seawater if the bonfire is on the beach, rather than in her garden.

Coloured by condiments

The next stage of the process involves an application of salt and vinegar – the acidic vinegar getting to work on the desired areas of the metal sheet. The effect varies: copper treated with vinegar results in a greenish-blue hue – Julie’s much-desired verdigris colour – while brass with salt and vinegar develops a pinkish shade and has a distinct texture, which shows through the painting from the metal substrate.

The longer the acid is left to do its job, the better it is, explains Julie. One of the pieces in her studio, covered in salt and vinegar, has been developing for two or three years, and Julie will, eventually, create a painting ➤



A large piece being worked on in the garden. The vastness of the subject is captured in tones of burnt copper and verdigris, creating an impactful artwork that appears to ignite the sky.



An explosion of raw colour suffuses the sky with a golden glow in one of Julie's paintings.

from it. "It looked quite interesting a year ago," she says. "It's now a lot lighter. It was a more verdigris colour before."

After the acid stage, the metal's surface may be sanded in places, revealing the base colour, or Julie may use her grinder to mark the metal – power tools are part of her armoury. Wire wool comes in handy too.

The metal is also weathered in the open air – occasionally with the added winter luxury of snow or frost, which, when painted, creates an extraordinary effect as it melts.

Outdoor palette

Paint is applied on areas of the metal to achieve the image Julie is visualising. She works with pastels and spray paint – an array of the latter is dotted around the lawn which, while she is working, serves as a huge palette. Julie has also sourced a translucent, chalk-based spray paint, which she can manipulate manually across the metal, experimenting with the effect and still revealing the burnt copper beneath.

"You have to be careful not to go too far, adding too much paint," she says, as she wants the metal to sing from the picture. "If there's too much paint, and you can't see the metal, you might as well just use ordinary canvas." Any excess is sanded off.

A strong varnish of the type used on brass boat fittings is applied to the completed picture – although some commissions can be left unvarnished by request if the buyer wants the image to continue developing once the piece is installed in its new home. The sheets are affixed to substantial wooden frames, placed behind the metal and well capable of taking the weight.

The whole process takes at least five months, governed by the prevailing humidity, as this impacts the drying time. At the start, the exact detail of the finished piece is an unknown quantity, varied by the unevenness of fire; the incident elements; and the time for which the acid is left in place. Each painting is an individual and hard to reproduce.

"I always work on more than one painting at a time – it makes sense because of the drying time. I might have five paintings lying around outside, all being weathered."

Julie describes the appeal of working with her unusual 'canvases'. "I love the sturdiness of the hard, strong, solid material, which can be thrown into the back of my car. I bought the car to fit the copper sheets. And I can put my dog, Bonnie, on them in her basket and drive for miles, and not have any damage."

Dramatic skies

She likes the luminosity and three-dimensional qualities which give her paintings depth. "I love the way the fire burns the copper, leaving dramatic



Pastels are used to add more subtle hues to a skyscape (top). An electric sander creates texture on the metal surface (above).

skylscapes. And I'm able to scrape and scratch and use a grinder on it, changing the patterns with the three-dimensional shapes, which I couldn't achieve with any other surface. I love the way the material forms its own patterns when being weathered outside, forming its natural oxidation. My work is semi-abstract, with depth, drama and luminosity. Some people have described it as "Turneresque".

Working with such immense, heavy materials is not without hazard. "I once broke my ankle moving a painting, and I recently broke a rib as I fell while carrying a very large one," reveals Julie.

During 2020, as the pandemic struck, when Julie was exploring new paths – when nature was in the ascendency, and the human footprint was reduced – ➤



Julie outside her garden studio with a selection of her artworks reflecting land and sea.

she started working on smaller, tree pictures. “I’d go off with the dog, sit in the trees and paint in situ, using small sections of copper,” she says. These tree pictures are 12in by 4in (30 x 10cm) or 8in (20cm) square.

Recently, Julie has produced some near-prophetic artwork. She painted a series that perfectly captured the lights, colours and moods of the 2024 aurora sightings – just before they actually happened. “People saw the paintings and thought I’d painted them as a result of the solar storms,” she says. Unsurprisingly, she sometimes finds it hard to part with her creations.

Julie’s journey in extraordinary art has led her to become a Fellow of the Society of Women Artists (SWA) – a position awarded in late 2022 after her painting *Copper Storm* won the Derwent Fine Arts Prize at the 2021 SWA annual exhibition.

Her work continues to evolve. “I feel that if you don’t quite know where you’re going [with a piece] you’re a real artist. It’s all experimental, which is a lot of fun. I could never go back to canvas.” ■

• Words: Simone Stanbrook-Byrne • Photography: Clive Doyle

CONTACT

Julie’s limited-edition prints are smaller than the originals but still capture the wonderful essence of her larger pieces. Prints start at £48.

Full-scale works on metal start at £220.

More information can be found at www.julieoldfield.co.uk

