

# Primrose Hill People Hands and Skulls – Painting in Primrose Hill

By The Mole on the Hill

*Hands. You can't tell a mole anything about hands. That's what we are, a pair of hands attached to a little furry body. So when this artist says she's got an exhibition of paintings of hands at an Oxford college I thought I'd give it a go. The hands were all right, but those lawns! I couldn't wait. Certainly left my mark there.*

Patrice Moor, aged 58, has her 'Many Hands' exhibition currently on show at Somerville College. The college, founded in 1879, was one of the first women's colleges in Oxford. Since 1994 it has had equal numbers of men and women as students. Her exhibition is a series of fifteen paintings, each 18" x 14", combining oil and pencil on a white background, the result of a residency she had there in 2016.

"Somerville has an ethos of being egalitarian and open-minded. At the start of my residency I had no idea what I would paint. I needed to engage with the institution and then have an artistic response. It is not a particularly wealthy college and doesn't have a collection of beautiful objects. But it does have people. I had painted hands about twenty years ago so I decided it would be interesting to paint hands again and try to capture something of the essence of the college through this subject. I met many members of the college, spent time with them, photographed their hands and then started to paint. A final selection of fifteen paintings was made for the exhibition in the chapel. This was partly planned and partly instinctual, creating a harmonious installation."

The result is a cross-section of Somervillian hands: Somerville's students, a librarian, the college principal, a gardener, a porter, a chef and a four-year-old boy attending Somerville's nursery. Interestingly, Somerville is the first college in Oxford to have a nursery.

So how does an artist become an artist in residence? You knock on doors. Patrice has had residencies at the British Optical Association Museum, the Royal College of Physicians and the University of Oxford Botanic Garden. All done by asking. When you see the quality of her work, you realise why they snap her up. And here is the mystery. Patrice is a self-taught artist.

Patrice had an interesting upbringing. Her mother was Dutch and her father was from Luxembourg. Her mother died when she and her brother were very young. Her father was a diplomat so they moved from place to place and



Patrice Moor  
Oxford University images/  
Joby Sessions

from school to school. The result was a solitary, studious child who blossomed when she attended a language school in Oxford at nineteen. She loved the relaxed way of life here. It was not the bourgeois society she was used to.

She then moved to London and was a Primrose Hill nomad for a while, living in Gloucester Avenue, Princess Road and Ainger Road while she completed a first degree in History and French Literature at King's College London and went on to do a Law degree.

"I've lived in Primrose Hill since 1980. By accident I was able to rent a flat in Chamberlain Street, opposite where I live now. My landlord, Clifford Wyndham, had bought three houses in Chamberlain Street in 1945 for £1,000 each. You could have bought the whole street for £14,000. Cliff lived in one house and rented out the other two. The life was charming and bohemian and I loved it with its top-floor windows looking out onto the trees of St George's Terrace. I remember thinking in the back of my mind: if I ever have a family, I'd love to live in Chamberlain Street."

No sooner said than done, Madame (Madame by now had three children). Her husband bought their present house before she had even seen it. It didn't seem to matter. They have lived there happily for twenty-four years.

So how did the painting start?

"By accident. A very dear friend gave me a box of watercolours and a sketchbook. I started playing around. I had never done anything like this in my entire life. I just played with different materials and different ideas. I wasn't very good at first. I improved. That is inevitable."

*Easy to say that. Me, I'm brilliant at digging, but ask me to do anything else and I'm rubbish and I'll stay rubbish no matter how long I keep at it. So there must be something special about this Patrice.*

As her children were growing up, Patrice started painting their portraits. Friends saw them and asked her to paint their children; and they paid good money for the pictures. Patrice went on to paint still-lives. She had a lot of exhibitions and sold extremely well. And then came a Damascene moment.



Helianthus Annuus (2014) 102cm x 102cm, oil on linen

"I decided I either had to give up painting and get a job; or actually paint what I wanted to paint and not focus on selling."

And that is what Patrice did. In her studio she had a human skull and she decided to paint it. She had developed an interest in the image of the skull from an early age, due to the deaths in her family during her childhood.

"I didn't know anything about the origin of this particular skull. It has clearly been buried because the pigmentation is earth-coloured rather than ivory. I spent a year and a half painting that skull and nothing else. I was like a monk in a cell. I would go into the studio every day and I made rules for myself: I would use only five colours; each painting would have the same background; each painting would be the same size, 5" x 7"; I would only spend three hours on each painting and I wouldn't go back to it the next day. Some days I wouldn't paint anything. Some days I would do three. I did 252 paintings of that skull.

The number is now over 300. That was maybe the best year and a half of my painting life so far."

Another series of skull paintings, representing the Stations of the Cross, has been exhibited as an installation at St John's College, Cambridge, in Worcester Cathedral and at St Mary's in Primrose Hill.

"I feel very privileged with my residences and exhibitions. They are enriching experiences, they broaden my horizons and they teach me a great deal. I have the opportunity to meet fascinating people who are often experts in their field, and it is life-enhancing."

Patrice has recently started a residency at Lincoln College, Oxford, where she will be having an exhibition in the autumn of 2018. She is also working on a book of her collages in collaboration with an artist in Amsterdam.

[www.patricemoor.co.uk](http://www.patricemoor.co.uk)