

CITIES OF THE RIBBLE VALLEY

For a dedicated country girl, artist Angela Wakefield has a fascination with some of the world's biggest cities. She spoke to Roger Borrell

Artist Angela Wakefield is every inch a country girl. 'I would find it impossible to live in a big city,' she says. 'I love the vibrancy there but I also find them quite scary places.' This view is reflected in her decision to work in a studio in the Ribble Valley village of Ribchester and live with her family by beautiful Beacon Fell.

Rural life suits her. Yet, in a strange way, much of her life is spent in some of the world's biggest cities. On canvas and in acrylics, she roams the dark corners of central Manchester and the brash, neon-lit streets of downtown New York.

With shades of film noir and strong echoes of American realist painter Edward Hopper, Angela has become one of Britain's leading contemporary urban landscape artists.

The combination of light and shade interspersed with dazzling flashes of colour make her work instantly recognisable and very collectable. Major pieces will fetch in excess of £12,000 although it is generally felt that if she was London based her paintings could command three times as much.

Private collections across the UK, Europe and America contain her work and admirers in the Middle East and China are now joining the list of people keen to commission her. One recent accolade was to be asked by an American publishing house to provide the dust cover for a new novel. 'I can't believe that's little old me from Accrington,' says Angela with genuine wonder.

Her mum taught her to draw but it wasn't a particularly artistic family and it never occurred to the young Angela that it was a way she could



ABOVE: Angela enjoys working with other artists in the studio

PHOTOGRAPHY: KIRSTY THOMPSON

LEFT: Reflections In The Rain, Urbis Manchester



BELOW: Manhattan

make a living. 'I was always drawing but it was always regarded as a hobby,' she says.

She was working in a pub when she met Phil Harwood, the man who would become her husband. 'Whenever I met someone new I always showed them my drawings and sketches,' Angela said. 'He obviously saw something in me and he encouraged me to go to university.'

She initially studied at college in Blackburn before going on to UCLan in Preston to complete an art degree. As it transpired, she was one of the few people in her class who wanted to earn a living as an artist.

She and Phil were concerned that there were so few galleries catering for contemporary northern artists who wanted to make a living from their work. Reluctant to follow the well trod path to London, Angela and Phil set up Ascot Studio and Gallery in Ribchester ten years ago.

As Angela became established so did the gallery and its adjoining studio in what had been a run down part of the old Bee Mill. Angela's earnings were ploughed back into the business with the aim of supporting local talent. ▶



'I suddenly found something I wanted to do. It was my eureka moment'



Fifth Avenue

In that decade, the Ascot has developed an international reputation for showcasing the region's brightest artists. Angela still works in the studio having stepped back from helping Phil, the director and curator, to run the gallery.

'As far as the gallery is concerned I'm just another artist,' says Angela, who currently has a display running in the gallery. 'In fact, Phil is probably tougher with me - if he doesn't like something I've painted he won't put it up. There are no benefits to being married to the man running the gallery!'

The urban landscape is a subject Angela stumbled across when she was studying in Blackburn. 'I suddenly found something I

wanted to do. It was my eureka moment. It's quite a weird feeling finding something you really want to do and would be happy doing for a long time.

'It's a brilliant working environment in the studio. You need other people around you to discuss ideas or talk things through if something isn't working out. It stops you from becoming self-absorbed.'

Angela, who has a son Blake, six, and daughter Melody, four, isn't an artist who shuts herself away. In fact, part of the enjoyment of the creative process is contact with people who give her commissions.

They will often provide photographs of their favourite places and her views of New York are especially popular but she has also featured London, San Francisco, Manchester, Preston and her home town of Accrington. 'I'm not precious; they can see the work in progress and if they want me to alter something I'm happy to do that within reason. I've got a pretty thick skin!'

Recent commissions have included a painting of Stonyhurst for Princess Anne, who visited the school recently, and a painting for Football Association chairman Greg Dyke - a gift from his alma mater York University for his contribution to building renovations there.

'We talked to his family and they said he was a great fan of Edward Hopper,' said Angela. In that case, he won't be disappointed when he unwraps his gift.

You can see more of Angela's work at www.angelawakefield.co.uk. You can also find out more about the Ascot Studios and Gallery at www.ascotstudios.com.

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London bus in the rain