

Travel UK

# CHANGE OF ART

## Sunday Times designer Russel Herneman tries to forget his training on a freewheeling figure-drawing course in west Cornwall

Slight, athletic and naked, Amy is cavorting her way through a series of dance moves while my fellow students and I try to draw her using pastels taped to the end of 3ft-long sticks. I've only been at the Newlyn School of Art, in Cornwall, for an hour and I'm already befuddled. As if sketching with sticks isn't hard enough, we have also been told to draw with our weaker hand. To the untutored eye, the result might be described as "a right old mess", but we are assured by our dungaree-clad dynamo of a tutor, Faye Dobinson, that this is a vital warm-up.

As design editor and an illustrator for this newspaper, I draw a lot – but when I sketch, say, Boris Johnson with his pants around his ankles, it is with a bog-ordinary pen and a photograph in front of me to copy. So this pen-on-a-pole lark is a bit, as Bojo might say, discombobulating. But it's meant to be. As Faye, who is leading the Experimental Figure course, ceaselessly reminds us in her east London twang, she wants to break our bad drawing habits.

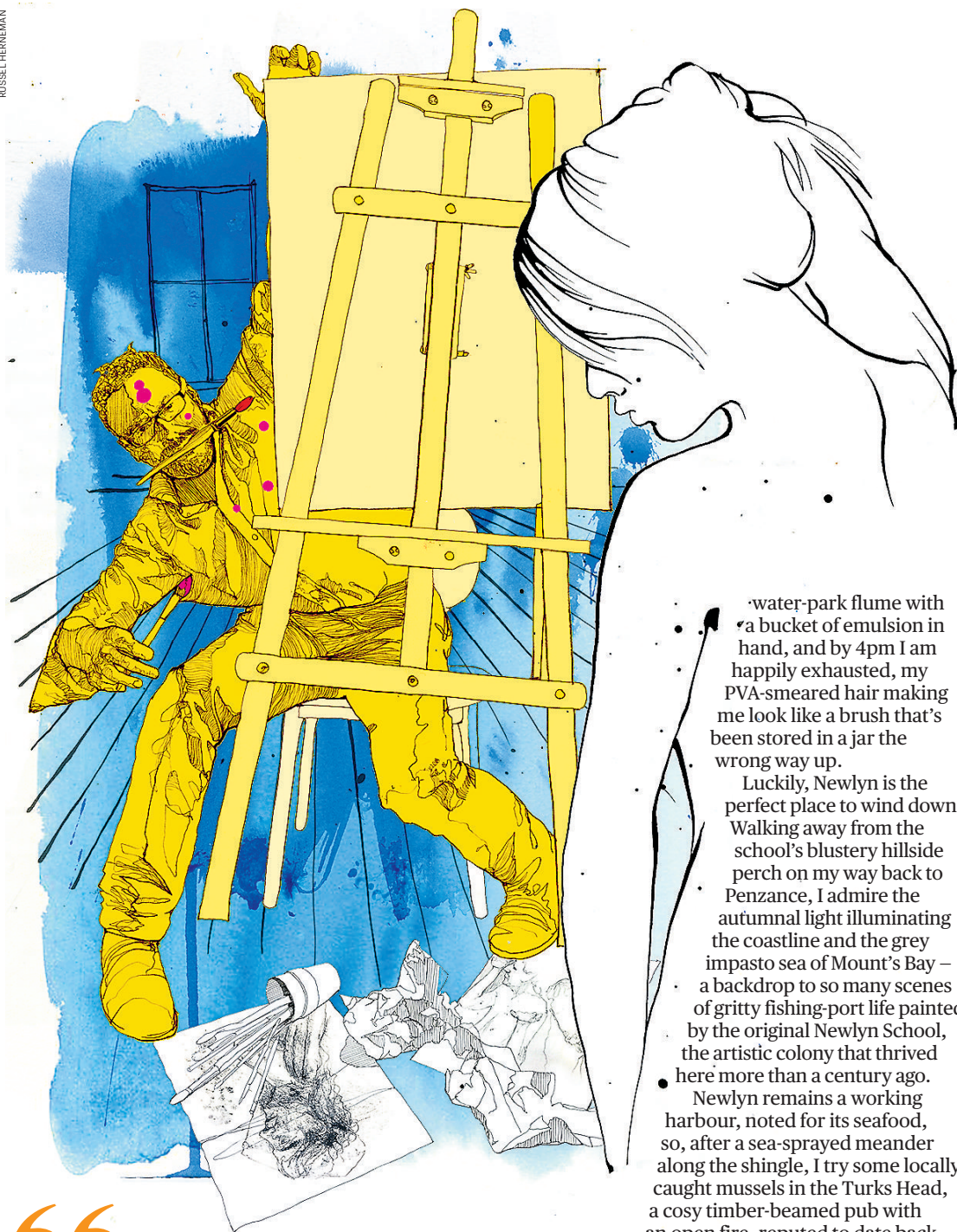
After an hour's wobbly sketching, we gather round a wrought-iron printing press for tea, biscuits and art chat. Jill, a professional painter, has a beef with show-off male life models who pull fancy poses that they then can't hold. Indeed, male overconfidence may be the reason

our group, who have stumped up £295 each for a three-day boot camp with brushes, consists of eight women and only two men. "Maybe they feel intimidated," says Arran, another pro. They might. I feel a touch overawed by Arran: she's a graduate in fine art from Central Saint Martins. And Jill's work is so annoyingly good, I want to set fire to it.

About half the group are serious, trained artists. But here, too, are an accountant, a counsellor and an advertising executive. Some feel a burn to be creative; others find drawing therapeutic, and talk of the sensuous pleasure to be found in the rasp of willow charcoal on textured paper or the fingertip chill of cold acrylic paint.

The star turn is Francine, a wisecracking New Yorker who claims, at 76, never to have drawn before. Lack of training be damned: she attacks the paper on her drawing board with a wild disregard for proportion that gives her work a fabulous vibrancy a graphic designer like me, taught to make everything line up, can't match.

Being upstaged by a septuagenarian beginner doesn't, however, stop me from loving every minute. Creating stuff without having to worry about the end result is so different from my day job that I find the hours pass in a joyous, messy rush. It feels like being shoved down a



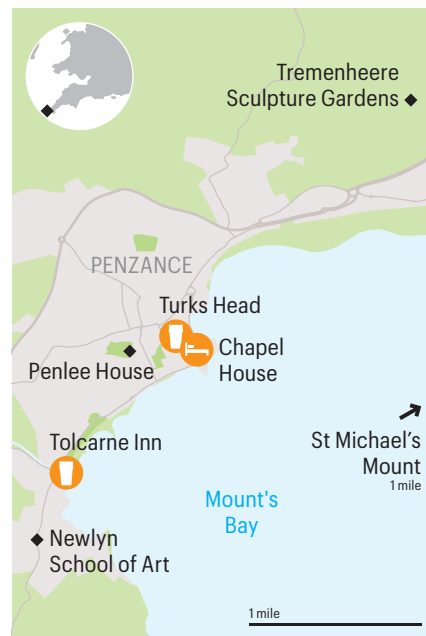
“My thumb has accumulated so much oil pastel that my iPhone refuses to recognise it”

water-park flume with a bucket of emulsion in hand, and by 4pm I am happily exhausted, my PVA-smear hair making me look like a brush that's been stored in a jar the wrong way up.

Luckily, Newlyn is the perfect place to wind down. Walking away from the school's blustery hillside perch on my way back to Penzance, I admire the autumnal light illuminating the coastline and the grey impasto sea of Mount's Bay – a backdrop to so many scenes of gritty fishing-port life painted by the original Newlyn School, the artistic colony that thrived here more than a century ago.

Newlyn remains a working harbour, noted for its seafood, so, after a sea-sprayed meander along the shingle, I try some locally caught mussels in the Turks Head, a cosy timber-beamed pub with an open fire, reputed to date back to 1233.

Now I know that, as an aspiring painter, I am supposed to suffer for my art, perhaps retiring for the night under an umbrella in a leaky garret. But a slight backache from leaning



over a drawing board is suffering enough, so I retreat to the Chapel House hotel, a combination of Victorian elegance and contemporary chic. Breakfast is served in the large kitchen, where locally caught sardines are cooked in front of me; my whitewashed room is dominated by an arched window that, at dawn, frames a purple sky as the sun rises over the sea; if this is not creative inspiration enough, there's a fine collection of original Newlyn art in the lobby.

On day two, we abandon doing anything as simple as drawing the model.

PRETTY AS A PICTURE  
St Michael's Mount. Left, Russel's take on his participation in the course

Instead, we are cutting her shape from a sheet of paper, then attacking it with Crayola pens. It is all gloriously childish – deliberately so, Faye says, freeing us from the weighty artistic heritage that comes attached to, say, Conté pencils or oil paint.

There is no let-up. At lunch, the sandwiches are accompanied by a presentation on the figure drawings of Giacometti and Rodin. It is literally a hothouse: fan heaters burn constantly to stop our naked models, Amy and Naomi, from freezing, and the pace is frenetic.

The sound of furious scribbling rises to a crescendo as Faye counts down the minutes and seconds to the end of a pose.

It's fun but exhausting. Penzance offers the knackered artist plenty of distractions, including lots of high-quality art (ie, not mine). Penlee House showcases paintings by Newlyn School artists such as Stanhope Forbes, Fred Hall and Edwin Harris; and there's a beguiling combination of subtropical plants and modern art at Tremeneere Sculpture Gardens, a 10-minute drive from Chapel House, where my favourite work is



the temple-like Skyspace installation, by James Turrell. It's an oval structure with a large egg-shaped hole in its roof, designed to soak the viewer in ever more intense blues as the sun sets.

Of the many tempting eateries to choose from, I plump for the Tolcarne Inn, a warm, unpretentious restaurant with flagstone floors, a pebble's throw from the sea's edge. It specialises in elegantly presented seafood; the scallops I order come so beautifully arranged, I feel the urge to draw them on a napkin.

Thanks to Mr Turrell's vision, I start the final day with my mind cleansed. My hands less so – I've accumulated so much oil pastel on my thumb that my iPhone refuses to recognise it. This is a pity, because I've at last made something I'd like to photograph. It's a print made by drawing onto an old Ordnance Survey map laid on glass rolled with printer's ink, then attacked with a rag soaked in white spirit. It's yet another technique that I will now use to splash, dunk, smear, blob, tear and splatter new life into my work.

I leave carrying a roll of 15 painted, ahem, "experiments" and a fresh sense of purpose. Next time I tackle Boris Johnson's pants, it will be with a pastel on the end of a stick.

The writer was a guest of the Newlyn School of Art. The Experimental Figure course costs £295pp, including all materials; the next dates are February 4-6, October 28-30 and December 9-11, 2019 (newlynartschool.co.uk). Doubles at Chapel House start at £150, B&B (chapelhousepz.co.uk)

### PROMOTED CONTENT



Island bounty: baked fresh red snapper and, right, the main dining room of the Harbour Club

through the generations. Think *stuffat tal-fenek*, a type of rabbit stew, thick minestra soup, *bragioli* beef rolls and lampuki fish pie, a delicious mix of mahi mahi fish, capers and olives.

Pastizzi, a savoury filo-pastry snack, is a national institution, and makes lunch stops for visitors quick, easy and affordable. The best place to try them is at Crystal Palace, a traditional pastizzeria in Rabat that is hugely popular with locals, serves all night and has queues around the block.

Most of Malta's towns are on the coast, and eating on quaysides overlooking bobbing yachts and glorious sunsets is a given. If you want dinner to have even more of a wow factor, there's Panorama in Valletta, with its Mediterranean cuisine, great cocktails and windows with a view. Likewise, try Barracuda, renowned for its seafood and located in an 18th-century villa.

Other impressive eateries include the elegant and airy Michael's, and the Harbour Club, overlooking Valletta's Grand Harbour. Fresh fish is a speciality in Malta, as you would expect of a Mediterranean island. Top restaurants offer innovative fusions and creative fish specials. Alternatively, if you fancy sampling the catch of the day under the stars, try small local bistros such as the Tartarun rustic restaurant in

Marsaxlokk. You could even buy your own seafood from the island's Marsaxlokk Fish Market and enjoy an impromptu beach barbecue. With even the coldest winter temperatures in the high teens, eating outdoors is always a pleasure.

Once you have eaten, there are plenty of trendy bars in

Valletta, and farther afield, where you can enjoy the excellent local wines that result from Malta's mild climate and rich clay terrain. The indigenous grape varieties are gellewza and ghirghentina, which produce full-bodied fruity wines. The islands have seven major wineries, with the oldest dating back to 1907. Book a tour of the San Niklaw Estate or Ta' Mena, on the nearby island of Gozo, and taste why they are picking up scores of awards and giving traditional European growers a run for their money.

If your idea of the perfect break is to eat, drink and be merry, you would be hard pressed to find anywhere better than Malta to do it.

Air Malta offers flights from Southend to Malta from £36 (including taxes but excluding check-in luggage). Fare based on half-return and subject to availability. For more information, visit [airmalta.com](http://airmalta.com)



To find out more, go to [maltauk.com](http://maltauk.com)

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Book by 15 December 2018. Prices are per person and include return Emirates Economy Class flights from London Gatwick. Other airports and weekend departures available at a supplement. Prices are based on two adults sharing. Offer valid for travel on selected dates from 14 to 26 January 2019 and includes a 3 night stay at 5\* Jumeirah Creekside on a breakfast basis. Customers will receive a one-day/one-park ticket for all passengers on a booking of three nights or more to UAE. All offers are subject to availability. Offers may be withdrawn at any time. Terms and conditions apply. ATOL 4086

\*TSSC's 1458 seats to Malta for travel to 28.02.19. Limited availability. Correct at 25.10.18