

Bringing a new dimension to abstract representation

Lucy Monro



Photo: © Courtesy of the artist.
 ◀ Louise Mizen in her studio.

▶ Fleet of foot.

"THE COMMON MOTIVATION for looking at horses and dancers has been their means of expression through movement. My aim is to emulate the impression, indeed the sensation of motion, using my chosen mediums of oil paint and charcoal." Louise Mizen's paintings are alive with colour, texture and equine character. They are as much about what is not there, as what is highlighted in detail and her use of colour brings fresh perspective to our interpretation of movement. But this is not abstract art, rather a combination of abstract and representational that forces us to make our own individual interpretation of what we see and what we think as a result.



Born in Devon and brought up in rural Surrey in the UK, Mizen grew up with ponies; a typical 'pony mad' girl who spent much of her time "charging around woods bareback on ponies." Like many she stopped riding as she grew up but has recently returned to equestrianism, including cross-country and dressage competition. Her love, and most importantly her understanding of, the horse are clearly evident in her work. As is the case with many who capture the very essence of the horse in art, Mizen is a horsewoman as much as she is an artist.

Horses were a favourite subject for Mizen until her late teens when, while studying art for A Level, she was told by her art teacher that painting horses was "too sentimental" - so she moved onto other subjects until, while she was in her third year at art school, a visiting tutor asked, "What did you paint before this?" Mizen immediately reverted to horses as her chosen subjects and has been drawing and painting them ever since. While she continues to experiment with other subjects (she is also known for her landscape and dance series), horses have been a constant throughout Mizen's career.

One of Mizen's motivations is to capture expression through movement, an aim that is common to her dance and horse series. She films horses and studies their movement frame by frame or lets them loose in an arena to let them move freely and then captures that movement in an abstract form that mimics nature.

"The common motivation for looking at horses and dancers has been their means of expression through movement", she explains. "Use of colour is vital to my paintings, I use it to describe the contours of a figure, to exaggerate a gesture or maybe to emphasise the glamour of a situation if I am painting a polo or racing scene. Very often I splash colour on to a painting to give a feeling of unity to the composition or perhaps it just suggests the direction in which the subject is moving." Colour is indeed one of most vibrantly obvious characteristics of Mizen's work. She uses strong colour in unnatural ways - such as a lilacy purple to highlight a bay's face and bright scarlet on a grey. Frequently she splashes colour across an image to suggest vitality and movement. By mixing colour with oil she creates a globular mix that she uses to give texture to a work in such a way that the texture of the colour used creates a sense of energy

and movement as much as the colour itself does. By splashing colour across a racing or polo scene Mizen both captures our attention and brings life to a canvas.

Mizen's recent work focuses on detail rather than expansive movement. "I am looking in much more detail at the way a horse conveys its thoughts and emotion by a look in its eye, the angle of its head or the flaring of a nostril", she says. "Horses are such expressive creatures and their grace and presence such an inspiration. There is so much to say about a horse rather than just reproducing an image."

While Mizen's recent work highlights and works with detail, it is noticeable that there is much that she leaves out - with the result that what is depicted becomes all the more powerful. "To my mind there is no need to expose the whole head and neck, it is enough to concentrate on the areas of the head where the light may fall or where the most expression is evident and to just suggest the rest", she says of such work. "Very often the charcoal drawings of fragments of a head require a second look before the horse becomes apparent. I enjoy this element of mystery, it adds another dimension to the work."

Mizen continues to develop and experiment and is working with a technique that involves thinking about materials used to suspend paint using acrylic and Perspex. "I have been experimenting with the idea of paint appearing to have no supporting material, for this I am using Perspex. Acrylic painted onto Perspex and lit in the correct way gives the impression of being an unsupported object, be it a horse or dancer, that casts its own shadow. I can paint on either side of the Perspex, which gives an interesting added dimension in itself!"

As she continues to explore and experiment there is no doubt that Mizen's work will develop and surprise as much as it captivates. It is the fact that her paintings and drawings are a masterly combination of reality and abstract that provokes and prompts us to question that makes them so powerful. In essence we are comfortable and uncomfortable with them at the same time with the result that our reaction to Mizen's work is intrinsically individual. 🐾

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