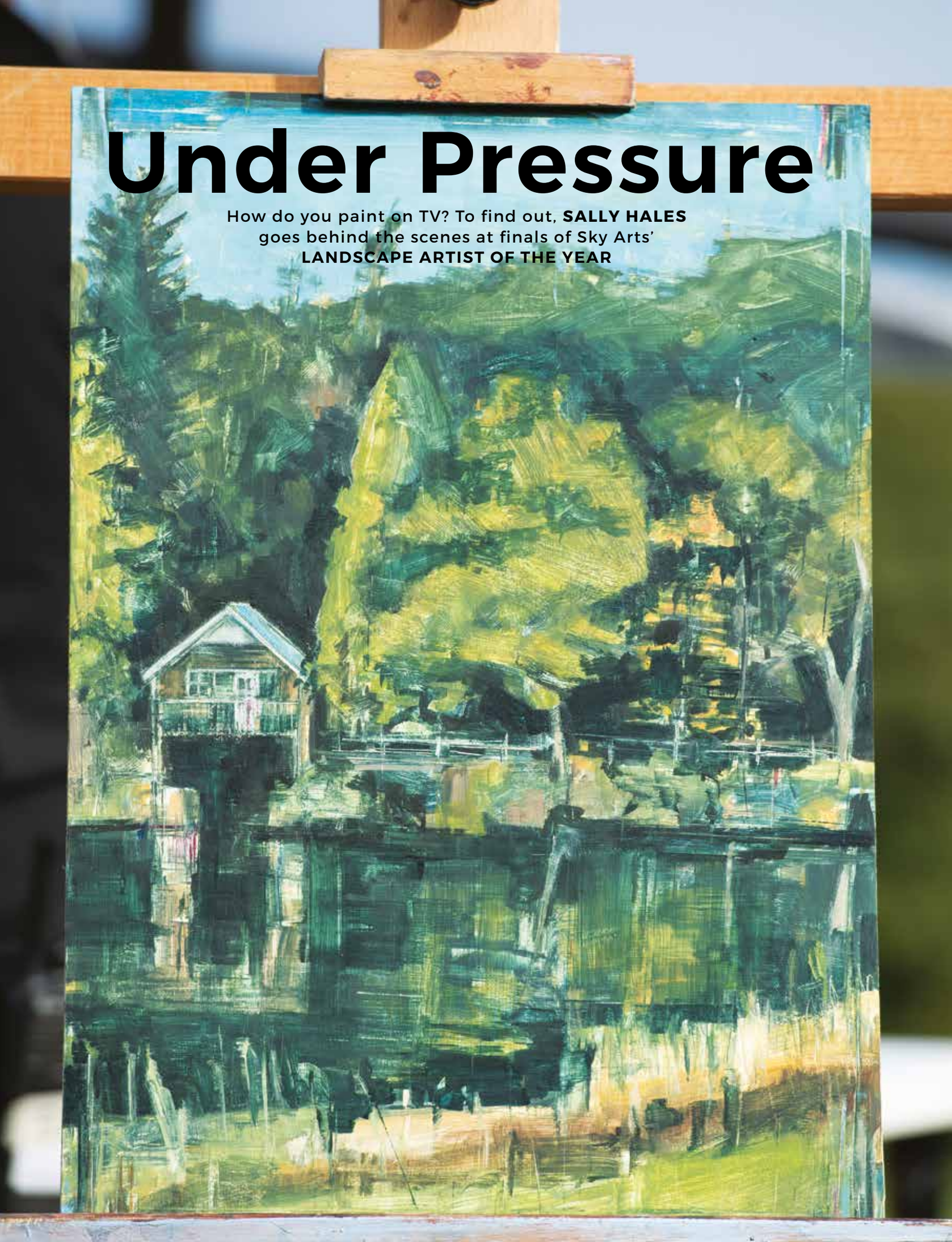
Under Pressure

How do you paint on TV? To find out, **SALLY HALES** goes behind the scenes at finals of Sky Arts' **LANDSCAPE ARTIST OF THE YEAR**



Despite its bucolic beauty, there is nothing natural about the Winkworth Arboretum in Surrey. Created by an avid collector of trees, the undulating valley proved the perfect canvas on which to "paint" a scene of autumn colour. So it's no wonder this curated vision has been chosen as the location for the final of Sky Arts' *Landscape Artist of the Year.* On this early autumn day, its peace is punctured by a production crew milling around as three anxious painters are positioned in their pods for the four-hour challenge of interpreting the scene. As cameras whir into life, the artists look calm, yet they quietly share the same anxiety: trees.

Twenty-seven-year-old Alice Boggis-Rolfe, a professional plein air painter who studied at Heatherley's, has rocketed through to the finals with her talent for capturing open skies. "There are more trees than I would pick," she says, resiliently. Art teacher Tom Voyce, 28, loves American painters such as Richard Diebenkorn, which has led him to paint big skies and architecture. "I am not comfortable with such a picturesque setting," he says. "Trees are a challenge anyway; green is a challenge. None of them are my friends." Maintenance supervisor John Ball, 38, usually finds charm in grim and deserted places. In a heat set in a lavender field, he painted a pylon. "I've always avoided trees," he says. "If I'm painting a petrol station and there is a tree, I think, 'I'll just get rid of that.'" And, as the show's presenter, broadcaster Joan Bakewell, tells us: "The thing we hoped about this venue would be that autumn would have come on a little further, so it would have been more golden." Today, there's no avoiding green trees.

And then they are off, painting in earnest in the sun beneath a perfect blue sky. Alice gets the rolling cloud she loves to paint, John picks out a bench – barely discernible to the naked eye – while Tom quickly finds his groove. But the scene won't stay so settled. By the end of the day, there will have been brilliant sun, cloud, strong winds and rain. That they manage to paint at all is astounding. The field is open to the public; dog-walkers and fans of the show flood in, milling around the contestants' pods. The crew stop them to do pieces to camera, and judges and >

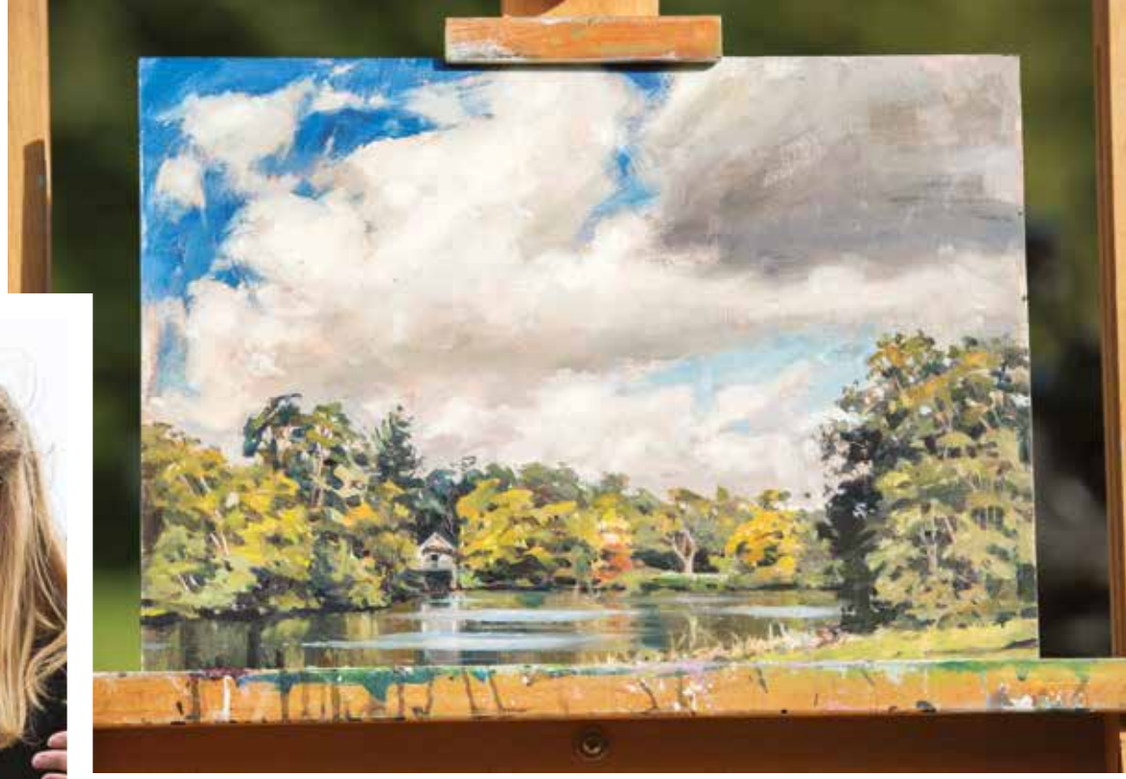


ABOVE Tom Voyce, *Lavender Fields Practice Study 1,* 30.4x20.6cm
BELOW Tom at work during the final heat
LEFT His painting is lined up for judging

Alice gets the rolling cloud she loves to paint, John picks out a bench that is barely discernible to the naked eye







BELOW Contestant Alice Boggis-Rolfe at work on the day **RIGHT** The painting of Winkworth Arboertum she produced

presenters clamber in to quiz them on their progress and mood. All the while, time-lapse cameras click way. “I think it’s got more intense the fewer of us there are,” says John. “Even in the breaks they want to interview you.”

Judge, artist Tai-Shan Schierenberg, says: “To be painting in public under time pressure seems an anathema for artists. And here they are doing it in a crazy circus. And they seem to thrive.” The finalists may have their doubts but they work like professionals. “Now they talk to me on-camera the way they initially talked off-camera,” says presenter and comedian Frank Skinner. A TV show is being made but, for the contestants, the painting challenge is real. “They change their techniques to cope with the four-hour challenge,” adds Frank, “often ones they have had for four, five, 10 years, which are very set. And, sometimes, they find a freshness that has gone away.” As the allotted time ticks by, this exact development in one artist is catching people’s eye. “I think a strange thing has happened today,” says Frank. “It’s like Tom’s suddenly come on. That is very exciting.” Tai has noticed, too. “Tom’s submission painting was beautiful because he worked with contrast, light and dark, but it was always in the same style. But there has been a natural evolution. It is related to what he has been doing, but it is just very good.”

With the light dropping, the painters’ time is up but the day isn’t over. The contestants aren’t only judged on today’s efforts. They’ve also been sent to produce commissions, which are revealed once the painting is over and before judging begins. “The final is a different experience >

“Painting in public under time pressure seems like an anathema for artists. But they thrive”

FRANK SKINNER: HOW JUDGING SPARKED HIS ART ADVENTURE



The comedian’s (right) love of art stems from a passion for graphic novels in his youth. But he’s never felt the need to put brush to canvas – until *Landscape Artist of the Year*. He explains why.

“I’ve started classes since the show because it is impossible to be around people painting without thinking, “I want to do this.” You could be intimidated by it but my feeling is that I’d like to know how good I could be. I’ve be going to art galleries for 15 years or so but only ever saw finished paintings. I had no idea how exciting it was to watch it happen.

“I haven’t taken on paint yet. I’ve been mainly using charcoal. But I’ve got some blank canvases and I’ve got some oils and I’ve got some brushes and I’ve got an easel. Yet I have a phobia of spoiling the beautiful white canvas. When I went to an art class, the first thing the teacher told me was to take the paper off the board and scrunch it into a ball and throw it on the floor. Because it doesn’t matter. If you waste a piece of paper, it’s fine. So maybe I need to smash a canvas to pieces, and then I won’t mind painting on it.

“You have an image of doing it when you retire. But when you see these people who have been doing it 10 years, you realise, if you do that, on the upward arc of where you would have got, you are going to leave it at the bottom of the curve. So I should be braver.”



LEFT John Ball's finished painting from the final heat **BELOW** The painter at work in his pod **BOTTOM LEFT** John's commission painting of Chatterley Whitfield Colliery in Staffordshire



"I've started looking at what colours I like and creating an atmosphere with them"



because you have this anticipation about their commission paintings, which they have had several weeks to work on," says Frank. "Very often, when you see those paintings, theories and ideas you have had about the artist fall into place. It is always – genuinely – exciting."

While this happens, the painters are banished to a high section of the field, out of earshot. This is where we catch up with them one last time, tired, elated, nerves still jangling. "It's been really fun," says Alice, who finished early, with around half her time to spare. "I've had a nice time. It's been much more relaxed because it's only three of us."

Tom, who has a fine art degree and masters, is certain the show has made him evaluate his practice. "I learned massively," he says. "One thing I would take away is not to write off anywhere [as a subject]. I always had to have to have a certain amount of light and contrast, and a structured landscape. I'm open to anything now."

John's commission painting is on his mind. He thinks it's the best work he's ever done. "I've started looking at what colours I like and creating an atmosphere with them rather than trying to mimic what you see. I tried to tie it all together." He isn't so confident about today's work. "I do find it frustrating working within the timeframe," he says. "Usually I'll build up thinner layers of paint." Yet he is positive about the experience. "With each heat, I've challenged myself because I've done something I'm not comfortable with, or I've tried something. It has made me be more confident." With that the contests are ushered back down for the big decision. To genuine delight from the crowd, other contestants and crew, Tom is crowned, and soon the arboretum empties as the ever-efficient crew pack up. And so it remains to be seen what the artists' achievements on the show mean for their painting careers but, for now, they are happy – and philosophical. In future, says John, "I'll definitely put in some trees."

Read our full interview with winner Tom Voyce in the next issue.