

Painting ghosts

A GIFTED MARINE ARTIST FOR WHOM THE PAST LIVES ON IN MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

think 'marine art' and your mind's eye will probably conjure up some Nelsonian man o'war running before a gale, checkered gunports lashed shut against mountainous seas, sails billowing like cumulus. Alternatively, perhaps a quaint fishing harbour, or a pair of J-Class yachts rounding a buoy – on which, if you look closely enough, you can probably read the name.

Whatever truth such made-to-order nostalgia represents, Anthony Amos's work could not be further from it. The past seen in his paintings is more rust-tinged than rose-tinted. His paintings are of ships and the sea, but that's not what they're about. "They're about me," he says. "About my life."

Based in south Devon, with his own small gallery in Totnes, Amos was born in 1950, raised by foster parents, and went to sea the age of 17. He sailed around the world aboard deep-sea cargo ships, worked in the North Sea on dredgers and trawlers from Lowestoft, and served in tugs and workboats in the docks of his native Bristol. He even spent two years aboard SS *Great Britain*, re-rigging Brunel's great steamer after her return to the city.

It was a hard life: dirty, uncomfortable, dangerous – and that was just his shipmates. "Nutcases, tattoos, men with no legs – we had all sorts, especially on the trawlers," he says. There was always work to be done. "Chipping and painting, chipping and painting – it was never-ending. But you could get away with murder if you grafted."

The young sailor who loved art at school worked alongside men from a pre-war world of sail and steam. The way they worked,



their knowledge, and their memories, too, are all a part of the world he paints. He recalls two old salts from his Bristol Docks days. "They were a joy to be with – old school, old attitudes, past retirement age, but kept on because of their skills." On one occasion they were called in to save the council engineering department's embarrassment by putting the Prince Street swing bridge back on its mountings. They used nothing but 50-ton jacks, wooden wedges and baulks of timber lubricated with tallow. It could have been a scene from Brunel's day, and the youthful Amos was enthralled. "We've lost all that now," he says.

His ships and boats are working vessels, and his harbours are places of grime, slime, and industry, drawn from a gritty, salt-bitten working life that shaped him as an artist, but hardly exists any more. The figures in his paintings are always men, in smocks and overalls, scraping or painting, hauling or splicing, but always busy – intent on the job in hand, and oblivious to onlookers, like ghosts. "They've always got their backs to me," Amos observes.

His art teacher wanted him to go on to college after school, but it never happened. He eventually made it to the Royal West of England Academy, for a year's foundation course, at the age of 45 – older than the dinner ladies, as he says with a laugh. He passed with distinction, and has been a full-time artist ever since.

He works fast, as if trying to make up for lost time. His larger pictures are almost works of performance art, and retain all the vibrancy and energy that went into their creation. Behind the blurred, frenetic sketching lies the skill of a consummate draftsman. His vessels look right. They have to – there's no middle ground with the shape of a hull. It's either right or wrong.

He seldom has a brush in his hand – thumb, index finger and a rag are the tools of his trade – and uses intriguing combinations of paints to achieve the effects he wants, with 'water-mixable' Windsor & Newton oils alongside a heavy, black gloop in a big tin that seems slightly out of place.

"It's a household paint, bitumen based," he explains. "They say oil and water don't mix, but they do." Bitumen seems a suitable medium for pictures which are so steeped in tarred hemp and rust that you can practically smell them. "I like the paint to have that link with what I'm doing." That link between art and life.

