

HOW TO SURVIVE AND (POSSIBLY) THRIVE ON A REALITY TV ARTS COMPETITION

by Gary Jeffrey

*HELLO! I assume you're reading this because you're curious about what it's like to take part part in **Sky Arts Landscape Artist of the Year (aka LAOTY)**. I participated twice – in 2016 and 2019 – and my experiences have run the gamut from abysmal to great...*



This was my submission piece in 2016 – painted over four days (one hour each day) on a windy cliff top at Land's End, Cornwall.

acrylic on board 10" x 30"



My Stowe piece was an unfinished and fairly anodyne effort. I knew in my heart I was better than this.

acrylic on board 14" x 20"



Submitting another holiday painting – this time painted in two sessions of 3 hours each – got me my second chance at LAOTY.

Gala Millor, Mallorca

acrylic on board 11" x 15"

LOWS

July 2016, I was in a pod, in Stowe, Buckinghamshire, taking part in the last filmed heat. I was about as unprepared and green as it was possible to be and from the outside probably looked like a rabbit caught in headlights just before it gets smushed by a car. *I hadn't even watched the programme!* And had only resumed painting the year before after a lay-off of 16 years.

Unsurprisingly it didn't go well. I was too ambitious and tried to take in too much of the scene. I wasted time measuring and fussing over drawing accuracy before blocking in and tried to catch up by working through my breaks, with scant opportunity to see what anyone else was up to, or even take a breather! Flailing and pressurised, I tried my best to interact when called upon with presenters, judges, and during the numerous vox pops (mini interviews direct to camera). Clenched and angst-ridden as I was, given *another* four hours *maybe* I could have made something of my painting. As it stood I never even came close to making the shortlist of three.

Pencil artist Philip Edwards won the heat and I was struck by the contrast in our attitudes. Me — frightened, tense, negative...and Philip — relaxed, passionate and so obviously enjoying the whole process of taking part in the show.

HIGHS

Spool forward to May 2019 and I'm on the phone answering a series of questions posed by Story Vault Films assistant producer Alannah Foster:

"So why did you apply to be on the show again, Gary?"

"Redemption!" I blurt out. Alannah bursts out laughing, but it was true — I was on a mission — a mission to atone for the poor showing of 2016.



Some of the other participants seemed fazed by the subject matter. I decided to treat it as an arrangement of shapes and colours and not worry too much about what it “was”.



The Gatehouse at Herstmonceux

started off with a lime green building and an orange sky! Risky, but it helped imbue colour in a scene of flatly lit, monotonous brickwork. The edges were left deliberately vague because there's never enough time to finish the whole painting on a LAOTY heat!

acrylic on canvas 16' x 20"

*I recognised Sarah from following her on Instagram and it was lovely to actually meet her in person!

<https://www.sarahmanolescue.co.uk/>

*The other semi finalists:

<https://www.patsymoore.co.uk/>

<https://james-murch.myshopify.com/>

<https://www.sueengland.co.uk/>

<https://davidyouds.com/>

<https://www.fujikorose.co.uk/>

Cathy Reddy Fine Art Printmaker

The day arrived. I had persuaded my Dad to drive down from Suffolk and be my “support”. He agreed on condition he could take part as a Wild Card so he'd have something to do all day (he has a famously low boredom threshold!). It made a huge difference having him along. (I'd gone solo in 2016) — we were pals having a lark on a jolly adventure in TV land together.

The Castle. There it sat looming over the four nearest pods. We turned and glanced enviously at the artists setting up in the four furthest away pods, separated from us by a large shrub. Surely they must have a better view of this red brick...*cliff?*

Situated in pod #1, I looked up. The turreted gatehouse seemed to fill my entire field of vision. I looked down at the diminutive 12 by 12 inch board I had prepared and turned to a production runner:

“I'm gonna need a bigger canvas...”

“...and paint like the clappers!” I said softly to myself.

I didn't have a game plan as such, but I did have an intention — to have the complete opposite experience to 2016. Maybe it was familiarity with the process but this time I was able to be mentally unaffected, amused even, by the surreal nature of the unfolding day.

Five thirty pm the production assembled in the great hall at Herstmonceux. At last I had made it onto the shortlist of a LAOTY heat:

“...and the artist going through to the semi final is...”

“Sarah Manolescue”* rang out the voice in my brain.

“...Gary Jeffrey!”

REALITIES

It was a long wait until the semi final. The heat win had turbocharged my confidence, but also left me enervated and unable to sleep properly. Looking back I think it had sent me slightly deranged! I knew I wasn't the kind of painter who could ever win LAOTY — **but could I at least get to the final?**

Finally at a motel in Inverness the day dawned. The usual 6 am call-sheet start. A long meandering taxi ride on minor roads through an unfamiliar wilderness. Nervous chit chat with fellow participants Patsy and James* and the arrival at what seemed like the end of the Earth. A tiny harbour outpost overlooking an enormous body of water that seemed to vault away to a distant coastline of hills.



The view from my Pod at 9 am.

A chill wind blew in clouds bringing the first spots of rain. We rounded the corner and there they were — the familiar line of pods. But what was this they were facing?

Our words give us away. We stood looking at the nearest oil drilling platform out in the Firth:

“What d’you think of “the Beast” Patsy?” I ventured.

“I think it’s WONDERFUL!”

Sue likewise thought the structure **“Marvellous!”**

The truth is the filigree tracery of the criss cross latticework on the upright legs were giving me the internal screaming abdabs. The platforms seemed to glower malevolently through the misty sheets of rain like alien robots that had landed in the Firth intent on Highland domination.

As a painter I believe you have to be who you are and for my sins I’m mainly pictorial. I need to fall in love with a scene/subject and express that feeling in paint. Suddenly on semi final day it dawned on me that his approach has its limits! Confronted with something ugly and unappealing I needed to switch gears and think conceptually. At the same time the pod seemed to swarm with producers and camera people — I was reeling like a fighter on the ropes and we hadn’t even started!

I retreated into what I was most comfortable with — colour. I’d swapped out the colours used in the heat for different, mostly unfamiliar ones. My gambit would be to put myself in “colour jeopardy” and see if I could row my way back to safety by overpainting before the time ran out. (Oh how TV loves a bit of jeopardy!).

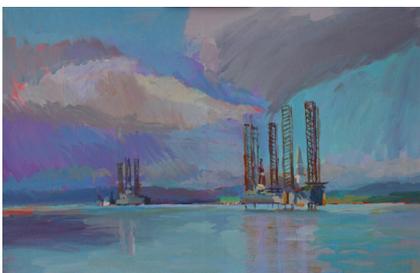
I relegated the feared and loathed platforms to an incidental role and tried once and for all to “design” a plein air piece in the moment, deliberately avoiding being too literal, using pieces of observation like ingredients in a recipe (or “raw materials” as I explained to Tai who seemed to dig the analogy).

The atmosphere across the whole set was electric! Every participant had already proven themselves, was in effect “battle hardened”. The competition aspect of the day had a serious edge to it — an almost mind-blowing intensity that ratcheted up through the hot afternoon until:

**“...and the third artist going through to the final is.....
.....”**

“...Gary Jeffrey” rang out the voice in my brain.

“ ...Sue England!”



A symphony of cerulean, indanthrene blue and dioxazine purple over a ground of pyrrole orange. I feel I won my colour battle but dodged the main challenge and in the end I got found out!

Cromarty Firth
acrylic on canvas 20” x 30”

TAKING PART IN LAOTY

– MY TAKEAWAYS

(and why I think it's worth entering...)

Ok, let's presume you have been selected for a heat. Here is my advice:

1. At all costs bring something of the "magic" (i.e. What the judges liked) of your submission piece into the heat picture. Failure to do this is the number one reason for not making the shortlist in my opinion (— and I should know!).

2. ALWAYS LISTEN TO JOAN! As well as being a presenter Joan is particularly supportive of the participants. I guess she's seen a lot of art in her time and sometimes has an instinct for when an artist is failing to do point number **1** and she may well prompt you!

3. Don't be tempted to work through all your breaks! You need to take time out, see what the others are up to (*come on* — you must be curious?) and generally enjoy the unique experience of the day.

4. Don't take the judgment (whether *against* or *in* your favour) too much to heart. There can be enormous variables at play. Luck affects the result more than people looking on, or watching at home, might imagine (i.e. The taste of the judges; the random nature of the challenge; the weather! etc, etc).

5. ALWAYS LISTEN TO JOAN!

– IN SUMMARY —

It's good to be tested isn't it? Painting out of doors is already a challenging activity and taking part in LAOTY is that x 10! If you can dig down and tap into the extrovert part of your nature (what do you mean you don't have one — you've just applied to be on TV!), enjoy the ebb and flow craziness of the production and knuckle down and produce something decent in 4-5hrs it's like surviving **artistic bootcamp** — you will come out *changed!*

For myself I've learned a great deal. Apparently I'm a "colourist", which I didn't know! And so I'm going to push and explore that. I've also taken to heart the notion that in really great painting there is "craft" (dealing with colour/tone, paint handling, design) and there is "concept" (ideas, man!!). Believe it or not this is next level stuff for me, and there is a world of difference between being told or reading about these fundamentals, and having your nose pushed hard up against it, in for instance — **a reality TV arts competition!**