



BIRD ON A WING

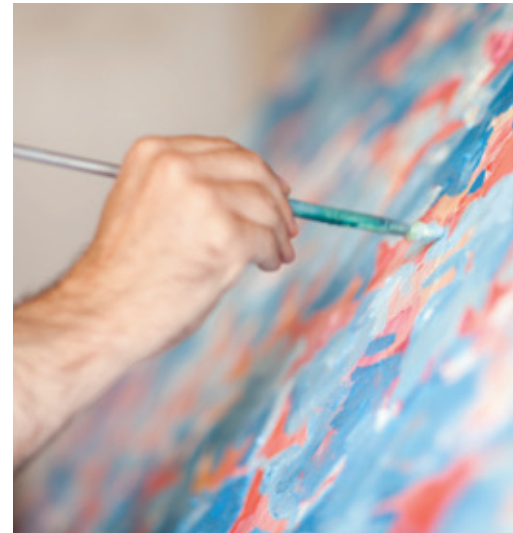
Quite simply one of the most successful artists of his generation, Jeremy Houghton describes to **CHARLOTTE METCALF** how his artistic life is lived on the edge

Jeremy Houghton paints in a barn on his parents' Cotswolds farm, a mile from where he was born, and lives with his wife and two little girls. He likes painting birds, using flight to research time, motion, light and space. He's also working on an installation in an old green house, looking at the way light and movement are layered within a three-dimensional space. Yet this is not a story about an obscure country painter. This is the story of an international artist at the zenith of his career who, as an artist-in-residence, has travelled the world, mingled with royalty, celebrities and athletes and won numerous high-profile awards.

Over the last decade, Jeremy has been artist-in-residence for HRH Prince Charles at Highgrove, for HM the Queen at Windsor Castle, for Lord March at Goodwood and was the official artist for the 2012 Olympics and London Fashion Week in 2008. When I meet him at The Connaught Hotel in Mayfair, he brings a refreshing, informal whiff of country air into the lofty, marble bar. His hair is tousled under a cap and he wears a tweed waistcoat with what looks like a cartridge bag slung across it. He is a little late and out of breath, having abandoned his car in a resident's parking bay. He laughs off the substantial parking fine he will undoubtedly receive. He can afford to laugh on every level. At 41, he has done more than many artists will achieve in a lifetime.



FROM LEFT: Jeremy Houghton at work; Graceful



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Souk in Marrakech;
Playing The Field;
Jeremy's studio; Mile
High Club; Jeremy
Houghton; Curved In All
The Right Places



Jeremy did a law degree at Exeter University but always wanted to paint. Needing long holidays to pursue his passion, he became a teacher at Summer Fields Prep School in Oxford and studied art at the Slade and at Aix-en-Provence before spending six years as head of art at Cape Town International School. 'I was reasonably young and reasonably single,' says Jeremy. 'Cape Town was a boy to man experience and it was good to be away from the norms of my life. It taught me to forge my identity and, when I came back at 30, I felt ready to pursue the life I wanted. My grandfather was in the army and I'd always respected the institution though I didn't want to be in it as I don't like being told what to do. But I started painting military scenes as I always knew I'd have an audience.'

It's perhaps Jeremy's canny knack of identifying potential buyers that goes some way to explaining his meteoric rise. An exhibition followed. 'Of course there was a great mailing list,' say Jeremy and he was quickly asked to be artist-in-residence for the Gentlemen at Arms during their quincentenary. 'They're the world's oldest regiment and they wear these amazing tunics with swans feathers and spurs – though the spurs are so huge they can't walk anywhere,' laughs Jeremy. 'They keep all their stuff at Gieves & Hawkes on Savile Row and then go off to the State Opening of Parliament. I loved being behind closed doors and seeing how the machinery of state operates.'

As a result, Jeremy was commissioned to paint HM the Queen. A solo show at the Saatchi Gallery followed and, in 2012, he became artist-in-residence at Highgrove and the Official Olympic Artist for London 2012. 'It was a bit like London buses all coming at once,' Jeremy laughs. 'It was quite a year.'

'Prince Charles said I could go for it and do what I wanted but I saw all the coachloads arriving at the house so decided to move away from that and focus on the farm, which says more about Prince Charles than anything else at Highgrove. His experimental vision, with all the farm's rare breeds and traditional methods, inspired me. Given the choice, I think Prince Charles would be a farmer. He's such a champion of the countryside. He has been quoted as saying mountains are more important than cathedrals and I think he'd rather wear a Barbour than all the royal paraphernalia.'

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Jeremy's resulting watercolours, influenced by old printing techniques and black and white photography, capture an essence of Highgrove that is ageless – they could be portraits of an 18th-century farm with people mending wattle fences in orchards, tending to hedges, ploughing with shire horses and hunting. 'These pictures have a timeless, nostalgic quality which acknowledges that to move forward we must look back,' says Jeremy, epitomising all that Prince Charles stands for. Prince

Charles was so delighted that he kept ten of the 30 or so pictures and the rest were sold, the proceeds going towards the Countryside Fund.

When Jeremy was then asked to be artist-in-residence at Windsor, he again chose a narrow focus. 'I like to find that nugget which tells a story that reflects the residence as a whole,' explains Jeremy. 'The mews is the heartbeat of the castle and the horses interlink public and private life – in the summer there are over 100 horses there and when the Queen arrives the place feels as if the batteries have suddenly been put in – flags unfurl, horses are groomed.

Horses are her passion, the love of her life.'

Capturing the spirit of the Olympics was another challenge altogether. 'The race itself is over in a split second,' says Jeremy. 'What I found so fascinating was the blood, sweat and tears of the training and seeing the Olympic mindset – four years of unbelievable blinkered dedication and build up to your goal.' Jeremy painted the sailing teams at Weymouth and equestrian



teams. He also spent time with Oscar Pistorius. 'BT was official sponsor and Oscar was their ambassador. He really was the poster boy, the man of the moment, competing in both the Olympics and the Paralympics. Having lived in South Africa myself, I understood why a rich disabled white boy growing up in a black area might feel vulnerable. He was naturally highly strung and, like many sporting people, able to switch egos.'

Jeremy's latest residency, announced on 13 December, is with Land Rover and Ben Ainslie Racing for the America's Cup. It came about from being artist-in-residence at Goodwood, where he met BAR's CEO, Martin Whitmarsh. For Jeremy, it's the ultimate challenge, drawing on his passion for motion, light and sea and his proven ability to capture athletic endurance: 'So much of my portfolio is about birds on the wing and Ben was drawn to my bird paintings; when you're eight feet above the water skimming along spookily silently at an incredible 50 knots, it has all the aerodynamic feel of flight.'

As usual, as artist-in-residence, Jeremy will be given extraordinary access to the inside story, embedded within the team. Yet he remains paradoxically on the edge. 'You're at the heart of the action but you can't really be there as you'd disrupt things. I'm immersed but can't be too involved. I remember from my legal training that you can tell if someone has a *mens rea*, or guilty mind, by walking round and round on the outside – the more you do that, the more you see who's inside. That's how I like working and it's so important to be able to step away and pick out the juicy bits that really tell the story. I like getting between the reality and perception. My canvases reflect my preference to be on the edge and lurk unseen in the shadows. I like to shape the space between things, where bodies linger, shimmer and take flight. The bird in flight is the motif that ties my work's development together.' If anyone's career has taken flight, it's Jeremy Houghton's and now, with the Land Rover BAR residence, it's soaring. He is fast becoming one of the most collectible artists of his generation. ■

