

Caroline Ireland



I began my career as an archaeologist who painted in her spare time. I obtained my degree in History and Archaeology from Liverpool University in 1977 and worked for over a decade in the West Country and East Anglia, researching, writing reports on, and sometimes illustrating, artefacts and pottery from excavations for publication. It was fascinating work, but bit by bit, the need to paint overcame all other interests and I began to feel I would like to work more creatively. I studied garden design and worked in horticulture for a few years, but eventually I managed to obtain a place as a mature student on the foundation course at Cambridge College of Art and Design at Anglia Polytechnic in 1991. For personal reasons I was unable to complete the course, but as often happens at these times, fate happily stepped in to bring about an unexpected move to West Dorset in 1992. This was the spur I needed to start painting seriously. I began to experiment with different mediums developing my fascination with colour, pattern, shape, line and luminosity.

From the moment I saw it, I knew that the landscape of Dorset had a deep resonance for me. It not only inspired me visually, especially the patterns created by the interaction between modern agriculture and the surviving prehistoric hillforts and barrows, but I also became intrigued by the relationship between ourselves and this ancient landscape and deeply impressed by our continuing spiritual need as human beings for the places inhabited by the ancient sites.

In 2003 I began walking around Maiden Castle making drawings and watercolour and pastel paintings for an exhibition called 'The Shape of Place'. I found my eye often drawn towards the Ridgeway, starkly visible from there, the round barrows creating a very distinctive silhouette on the horizon. I was very pleased to be offered this opportunity to explore the Ridgeway as a subject for making paintings.

From the very first I knew that my focus would be on the relationship between the winding linear path and the numerous barrows threaded along it. The visual impact of these elements corresponded closely with my fascination with shapes and patterns in the landscape. However, I could not ignore a deeper impact for me. While walking along the trail I felt deeply moved by these mounds, raised by unknown architects, to the revered, and possibly heroic, individuals of a culture long past. Who knows why this pathway was made or who journeyed along it? It became very apparent to me that, at some point in the long distant past, Death and the journey to the 'Otherworld' had played a significant part. I came to be interested in this aspect of the pathway in connection with its present outward appearance.

Using the title of the exhibition 'Spirit of Place' as inspiration, my paintings developed along 'atmospheric' lines, setting them all in the otherworldly wash of moonlight, where the spirits of our ancestors might be encountered or sensed.