



*The*  
CALL  
*of the*  
SEA

After forging a career as a successful artist while living in Australia, **BEN LUCAS** has returned to his Devon roots and the seascapes that first inspired him

WORDS: Catherine Courtenay

**left:**  
Aquarius

**below:**  
Ben works from memory and paints on a flat surface.

Photo: Melanie McNiven

‘For as long as I can remember, I’ve been captivated by the ocean.’ Whether swimming in its depths, surfing its waves, or walking the headland and gazing at its endless expanse, the sea has become entwined in the life and work of painter Ben Lucas, whose canvases capture its moods and colours in their shifting, fleeting moments.

Born in 1971, Ben spent his childhood exploring the countryside around his home at Woolsery, a fairly remote and wild area close to the North Devon coast.

‘I was always drawn to water from a young age,’ he says, remembering his fascination with the way water played over the stones in the trout stream where he used to fish. ‘I just love water. I’d spend my summers on the beach at Bucks Mills, snorkeling, and I got into surfing as a teenager.’

A love of the natural world initially took Ben to Winchester to study environmental sciences, but ‘I found the course quite dry.’

‘I used to go to the library and would find myself completely drawn to the art books. I was doing the wrong course!’

Ben had always enjoyed drawing, and this interest in art is perhaps not surprising as he comes from a highly creative family. Ben’s grandfather was the modernist architect and painter Colin Lucas, who received an OBE

for his work and was a member of Unit One, the group founded by Paul Nash. ‘He made beautiful houses. They were concrete with clean lines, but they were full of warmth,’ says Ben, who remembers his grandad as ‘a very shy man, a very calm kind of presence’.

Ben’s grandmother on his mother’s side was Mary Norton, who wrote the classic children’s books, *The Borrowers*, and who came to live in Hartland towards the end of her life. Ben’s sister is the portrait painter Fanny Rush and his brother is the sculptor Joe Rush, founder of the Mutoid Waste Company.

Grandmother Mary loved North Devon and she was not the only family member to be entranced by this remote coastal area. Colin had a cottage near Bude, just across the border into Cornwall, and when Ben was a year old his parents moved to a farmhouse at Woolsery. They too shared the creative gene and went on to set up a pottery at Welcombe. In later years Ben and his wife, the potter Elke Lucas, ran the studio for a time before moving to New Zealand and Australia.

During their time at the pottery, Ben was also painting abstract watercolours, inspired by the sea, a passion that continued in New Zealand, where he found inspiration in the dramatic views from their home close to the Southern Alps. >





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The feeling that comes from these land and seascapes, his internal reaction to them, are what Ben seeks to capture in his work. As a teenager, he’d been ‘filled with awe and wonder’ seeing and absorbing the rectangular ‘fields’ of colour in the work of American abstract painter Mark Rothko at the Tate in London.

‘The Rothko room had such an amazing impact on me. It was like a spiritual experience, they were luminous; they had a resonance about them that seemed to hum,’ he says. A random urge to paint on a piece of hardboard he’d found propped up against a wall, sparked Ben’s change from watercolour to acrylics and when he and Elke moved to Australia to set up Elke’s pottery, he made the transition into oils.

The couple returned to Devon in 2022, ‘to another kind of beauty, one which is more gentle and soft.’

‘In Australia the light was harsh and bright, but here it is diffused, like looking through a lens, it’s very peaceful,’ he says.

The sea is just a short step away from their home which lies in one of the narrow streets that cluster around the old fishing village of Appledore. Ben will go into the sea, or he may take a walk along the coastline to a place that allows him to observe the ocean. He lets himself feel the seascape. He doesn’t set out to make a painting, but he ‘allows it to happen’.

‘Soaking it up and observing it,’ he will take that feeling back to the studio where he will paint from memory, never using photographs

which he says, ‘are like having someone else in the room’.

Ben paints instinctively, but his mission is to keep the life within the work – too much interference, going too far, and that life force will become dull and fade. Some of his paintings may be looser, others more controlled, but he says: ‘Sometimes I get a feeling in my chest, an emotional feeling, that’s when I know I need to stop the painting.’

Ben’s studio is at the top of their sloping garden. He works on a flat surface, sweeping and moving the paint across the canvas.

The oils give him so much freedom, he says, helping to portray the ocean’s luminosity and translucence, its sunlit turquoise waters or underwater depths of inky intensity.

He goes through bursts of activity, keeping those all-important feelings fresh and alive. Sometimes they fade, and paintings don’t always work, ‘but I’m open to making mistakes,’ he says.

Coming home is opening a new chapter in the life of this artist whose sensitivity to the natural world is reigniting his love of the area – the sound of birdsong, or a winter’s evening walk ‘like a nocturne’, inspiring him to paint.

‘We spent 20 years in Australia and had an amazing time, but I have such a love of the coastline here,’ he says. ‘I always had a longing for this landscape.’ ●

**Chasing the Wind, an exhibition of work by Ben Lucas, will be at The Brownston Gallery in Modbury from February 16 to March 14. [brownstonart.com](http://brownstonart.com)**

**above far left:**  
*A Glow in the West*

**above left:**  
Ben has come home to North Devon after 20 years in Australia. Photo: Krista Eppelstun

**above:**  
*Eventide*

**right:**  
*Magellan’s Dream*

**far right:**  
*Coastal Paths*

