SARAH GRAHAM

Ridinghouse

A LONG AND HAZARDOUS RIDE

Ruth Guilding

Riding our horses through a blizzard in the deserts of Turkmenistan, with threadbare clothing and socks for gloves, we were cold to the bone. For hours there had been no trees or hedges; no shelter at all: just an endless plain, brown and white against the low grey sky. The isolated workmen's hut housed two silent men, a stove, two cot beds and some mice but it represented bliss. Nothing mattered, not the hard floor, the fleas, the howling gale threatening to lift the roof off. It was all part of the adventure I'd signed up for.

In 2000 sarah graham was not drawing. Instead, she had answered an advert on the Royal Geographical Society's noticeboard to accompany the 'quixotic travel writer' Jonny Bealby in a long and hazardous ride along the old Silk Road from Kashgar in China to the Caspian Sea.

Graham had Masters degrees in history of art and fine art from Edinburgh University and Edinburgh College of Art respectively, but a peripatetic, almost wild upbringing in Scotland and rural France had primed her for adventure. Loch Lomond and the coast of Scotland were home to the Grahams of Montrose, whose ancestry goes back to James i. Her father, Euan Graham, had been a wartime Group Commander in the raf, then Clerk to the House of Lords in civilian life. Here he went in for rackety escapades with his friend Alan Clark and kept a carpet python under his Pugin desk. Much older than the fathers of her friends, he gleefully flouted convention and encouraged his daughters to do likewise. On Sunday mornings in Wiltshire he gave them target practice, shooting into a copy of *Who's Who* with an air rifle, then opening it to see which of the peers listed on its pages they had hit. But above all he was a naturalist, taking them on long walks in Scotland, or up rivers in

NATURE AND NURTURE
opposite above: Tollie Farm, Loch Maree, from the Gairloch to Pollewe Road, scene of many childhood holidays in Scotland.
opposite centre and below: The farmhouse in rural Tarn-et-Garonne, south-western France, where the Graham family lived for three months every summer; Euan Graham instructs his daughters who are drawing the local flora and fauna.
above: *Nepenthes distillatoria* – a tropical pitcher plant endemic to Sri Lanka – from a well-used copy of Joseph Paxton's *Magazine of Botany* (1838), part of Graham's mother's collection of miscellaneous botanical materials

Snake-charming: Euan Graham as a young RAF serviceman in Ceylon, and seen again, decades later, with a grass snake necklace in the family's French farmhouse.

France looking for crayfish with a bucket and a net. Nature overran their farmhouse in Tarn-et-Garonne, where the hot storm-blown summer wind could bring an airborne plague of tree frogs or moths and insects from North Africa and southern Spain, laminating the white walls like one of Damian Hirst's butterfly-wing pictures. Graham still refers to her father's old field guide to insects: 'Even now, the plates excite me along with the thrill of using it to identify a death's-head hawkmoth or water beetle.' The family kept stag beetles and grass snakes in a vivarium under the catalpa tree; one snake was transported back to England but escaped to emerge from beneath the bonnet of their car as they arrived in Kent to stay with the Clarks. On thundery nights her father drove them up to the top of the nearest hill to watch the electrical storms over the distant Pyrenees. 'We were slightly unconventional because we spent three months every summer in France during the parliamentary recess, even going to the little village school there', she remembers. 'We were left to our own devices; we had no telephone, no television. So back at school in England I was self-sufficient; I didn't fit in and tended to do my own thing.'

Sarah Graham's mother, Caroline Middleton, had taught herself to garden from the books of Margery Fish at East Lambrook Manor and the examples of Beth Chatto and Mollie Salisbury (Marjorie, Marchioness of Salisbury). She

took her daughters to visit the famous nursery gardens of Countess Helene von Stein-Zeppelin in Germany just across the Rhine from the Voges mountains, and coaxed magnolias and large-leaved foliate plants to grow in the shady yard behind their flat in Chelsea's Beaufort Street. When she showed her 11-year-old daughter the inside of a *Magnolia grandiflora* flower and all its parts, Graham was prompted to draw it for her, fascinated by its seductively vellum-like skin that looked almost human. A few of her earliest plant drawings hang in her mother's house in France and the watercolour trout mural after a study by J.M.W. Turner that she painted as a student still survives on the limewash of her father's bathroom wall. While staying at Saltwood Castle with Alan Clark and his wife Jane (who is Graham's godmother) periodically throughout her childhood, Graham took in by a kind of osmosis Sir Kenneth Clark's collection of twentieth-century pictures that hung there, including works by John Piper, Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland. Clark had been an early patron and supporter of Sutherland in the decades when he was making his romantically morbid nature paintings. Sarah Graham slept in one of the castle's Gothic turrets with four of Sutherland's paintings hanging on the wall above her bed; when she took up drawing again in her twenties, Sutherland would become a lodestar for her work.

left: Medieval Saltwood Castle in Kent, the country house of family friend Alan Clark, housing the superlative collection of twentieth-century masterworks, including many by Graham Sutherland, which was gathered together by his father, the connoisseur Sir Kenneth Clark.

following pages: a turret bedroom at Saltwood with Graham Sutherland paintings.

Graham Sutherland, two studies for *Entrance to a Lane* (1939; Tate), from a series painted on the Pembrokeshire coast in south-west Wales in the 1930s. Sutherland's training as a printmaker and etcher is apparent in his simplified, almost abstract rendering of biomorphic forms in these early landscapes.

At the end of five years in Edinburgh, where she received a second-class degree, Graham was so disenchanted that she turned her back on painting. But she still had the ambition to do something more adventurous and energetic, as her heroine Freya Stark had done a century earlier, travelling across the Middle East. Graham began drafting and sending out proposals for short travel documentaries – one for an anthropological quest in Africa, another to Jane Goodall to work at the Gombey Institute in Tanzania – but could not get funding for any of the projects. Then, at the age of 26, she answered the personal ad in the Royal Geographical Society that took her to the other side of the world, retracing the nomadic Mongol emperor Genghis Khan's ancient Silk Road on horseback for almost five months.

Twenty years on, Graham is pragmatic about this venture with a near-stranger that turned out to be badly planned and mounted and came with the additional pressure of an obligation to film themselves at every stage. There were too many cultural taboos for a woman travelling in these predominantly Muslim countries and the dangers of the road were genuine ones. 'It was

just before the Twin Towers went down and we were surrounded by Tajik warlords carrying Kalashnikovs; later we found out Bin Laden was eight miles away, hiding in a cave. I was chased on horseback by four men up a shale-covered mountainside; it turned out they just wanted my Marlboro Lights. In the end we made a film that was bought by the Discovery Channel and Jonny Bealby wrote the book telling the story of our journey.'

'My mother says that the trip altered me, making me more resilient to life's challenges and strongly independent', she says. Arriving back in the UK at

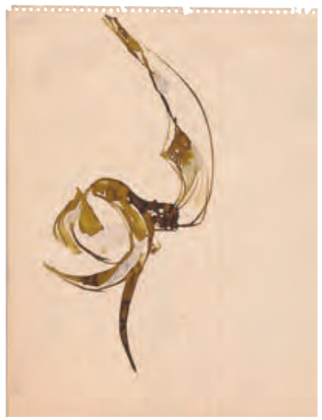
Graham pays homage at the grave of her heroine and role model Dame Freya Stark, pioneering explorer and travel writer who died in 1993, in Asolo Cemetery in the Italian Veneto.

Christmas, Graham was elected to the Royal Geographical Society as a Fellow and decamped to her father's home in Wiltshire. She began working for her friend, the agony aunt and journalist Mary Killen, and labouring for landscape gardeners Isabel and Julian Bannerman. Then, after a few years with a local antiques dealer, Graham met the flamboyant dealer John Hobbs and was enticed to his London showroom in Pimlico Road by a much larger salary. Trips to Russia and the USA selling antiques to decorators made her appreciate American energy and enthusiasm. 'I had great fun selling huge Irish breakfront bookcases, Chippendale sideboards and specimen marble tabletops.' She has since found her best audience for her own work there. But in 2005 she had a Damascene moment and decided to follow a strong call to return to drawing, renting her first workspace in the colony of industrial cement-walled studio units under the thundering Westway near Paddington Station. She saw many exhibitions in London, immersing herself in the work of Paul Nash, Michael Andrews and other modern British romantics; then she discovered the 'vulvic' iris paintings and spiky charcoal plant heads of Georgia O'Keeffe. The following year she staged her first show, at Olympia in an exhibition booth she had decorated herself and furnished with borrowed Regency furniture, and sold her entire set of charcoal drawings of sunflowers and artichokes to Ken Bolan, founder of Talisman, the antiques emporium. 'I started with charcoal because it was so expressive, so gestural and cost nothing, on huge rolls of brown parcel paper; I could make drawings as large as I wanted for very little. The resultant drawings on parcel paper 2 or 3 metres long, made for her two subsequent exhibitions at Chelsea Flower Show, caught the eye of Lyndsey Ingram, with whose gallery she has been exhibiting ever since.

For four years during her marriage to art dealer Ivor Braka, Graham divided her life between London and their home at Gunton Park in Norfolk. While managing their project to reopen the Gunton Arms, she continued to draw, working in a studio in the nineteenth-century Melon House in the park and another in Chelsea, where she has remained ever since. 'We had great fun, great parties, and I kept a python in a Damian Hirst vitrine in the hall.' Now she is married to James Holland-Hibbert, with whom she has two young daughters. 'I worked longer hours before I had my children', she says. 'The

pram in the hall does hold you back, but now I concentrate so much harder.' She is in her top-lit studio almost every weekday, but weekends are spent with her family in Wiltshire. Before her children were born she used to criss-cross the ancient lunar-like grass-scapes of the army firing ranges on Salisbury Plain for hours. 'It's the closest wilderness to London, a bleak and empty antidote to the city and noise. Walking there is almost like meditation; I can ponder on what I'm working on in the studio. Big landscapes are essential.' Equally vital are travels with her husband James to exhibitions, museums and art galleries around the world.

Comprising charcoal drawings of artichokes and sunflowers, Graham's first show was in 2006 at Olympia, where she furnished her stand with borrowed Regency furniture and reclaimed floorboards.

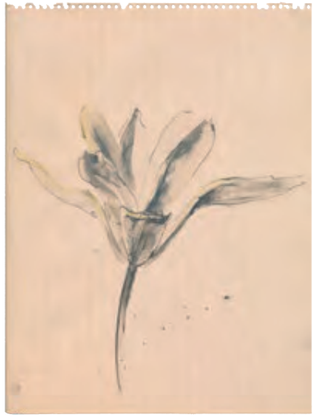
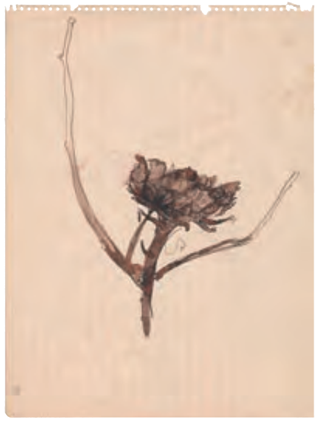



A SKETCHBOOK IS A LABORATORY
Graham's studies of spiky, dried or sharp-edged geometric plant forms influenced and consolidated her drawing style, fusing with her appreciative knowledge of Sutherland's fierce biomorphics to feed into her work ever since.

Drawings in pen, ink and pencil from a sketchbook dating from Graham's trip to South Africa with her father in 2007. 'We would walk for hours, my eyes on the ground, endlessly searching for plants and stones or bones, making quick drawings that I could then turn into independent forms back in the studio. I collected many dead proteas – attracted to their triffid-like forms. The harsh, dry landscape and wildfires there had stripped back their beauty to something almost skeletal'.

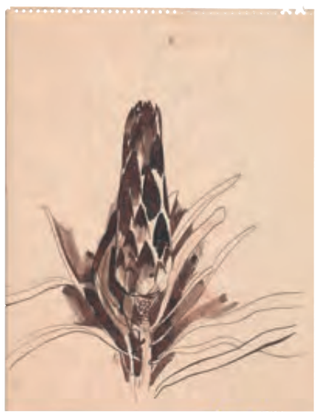








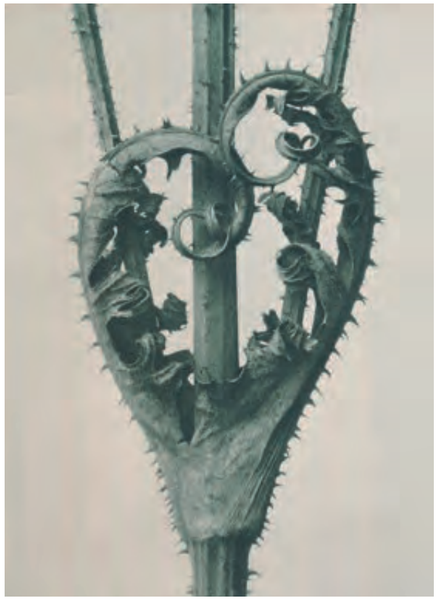



NOT BOTANISING? ART VERSUS SCIENCE

I'm not a botanical artist. If I can bring something to it that de-plants it and makes it Sarah Graham, then I know I've got it.

Combining art and science, drawing from nature is an activity that requires a developed ability to observe closely. Libraries at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the Linnean Society and the Natural History Museum hold thousands of botanical plant studies made by looking for the purposes of identification and taxonomy, before the invention of the microscope. For although botanists habitually pressed and dried specimens on herbarium sheets, drawings and paintings were easier to preserve and have survived for longer. Images produced with hand and eye still prevail despite the invention of photography, for a photograph can present too much data, recording details peculiar to one individual plant, while drawing can abstract from an entire species, generalising to produce the typical. When the Victorian pioneer botanist Anna Atkins

Tulipa and *Primula auricula*.



discovered a way of composing exquisite X-ray-style drawings by brushing developer over a specimen arranged on a sheet, the scientific establishment was unable to decide whether they belonged to art or science, for really they belonged to both. Her contemporary, the explorer-botanist Marianne North, bequeathed to Kew a gallery filled with hundreds of her painstaking records of far-flung botanical specimens – some previously unknown – painted in oils *in situ* in their habitats.

'That's why I'm not a botanical artist', says Graham. 'Too much dedication to the original source, particularly to scale, deadens it for me.' For her, artistic sensibility always trumps scientific accuracy, although she needs to know and look first. Nevertheless, in her studio she works surrounded by the history of science, and a *Wunderkammer* of natural history specimens and remarkable eighteenth-century German papier-mâché models of plants that scholars from

above left: *Lilium cruentum flore pleno*, 1783, from the archives of Trowbridge
above right: Heart stem of a *Dipsacus laciniatus*, 1928, by German photographer Karl Blossfeldt.

the Renaissance onwards would have studied and understood to look at the natural world. 'They were used to teach university students in Bologna. What excites me is that they actually come apart and some are cut into sections, showing their inner mechanics. They are things that have a secondary artistic appeal but were employed for scientific purposes: eighteenth-century brass instruments, skulls for teaching medical students or didactic models to teach them all about the rhizomes, stamens, petals and sepals. The close-up macro-images of seed heads by [photographer Karl] Blossfeldt that helped German students with photography were my original inspiration. They've inspired architects, artists and sculptors.'

Certain aspects of the way in which Graham uses strong colour relate back to historical and scientific discoveries too. The French musician Albert Cozanet, who influenced the Cubists with his analyses of the 'orchestration' of colour, coined the phrase, '*vivre*, *c'est vibrer*', 'to live is to vibrate'. Graham appreciates this when she reduces her colour fields to the black and white of her graphite drawings: 'Yes', she says, 'they do vibrate.'

She is committed to the practice of drawing but there are losses and gains in representing plant imagery in this way. 'In the past I've made small notebook drawings outdoors, but not recently. I draw in the studio from live specimens that fade – but on a huge scale – so I'm paraphrasing natural forms.' Her drawings are not facsimiles or even studies of plant life, 'but what did inspire me was the prints on the walls in my mother's house illustrating hundreds of years of botany, coming around in a full circle back to these science techniques used by Brendel, the botanical model-makers. When I see something, it's the forms that jump out.'

Nevertheless, Graham's drawings of plants and insects in their ecosystems take us closer to the natural world. Her medium is 'natural' too, for the inks and papers that she uses are painstakingly made from animal or vegetable products, prompting us to consider their possible applications for science, sustainability and conservation. She has had a long-standing relationship with the Natural History Museum's Department of Entomology, ever since she became a patron and donor. She supports research and collecting there, donating proceeds from the sale of drawings and occasionally borrowing

A case of beetles in the Department of Entomology at the Natural History Museum, London.

AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM
Founded in the 1880s, the museum is a pre-eminent centre for study and research, housing over 80 million specimens including those gathered by Charles Darwin. Zoological specimens preserved in alcohol are known as the 'spirit' collections. The entomology and botanical departments house 'dry' species. *opposite above*: Eighteenth-century papier-mâché models of plant forms by German model-maker Brendel. *opposite below*: Preserved reptile specimens in the Natural History Museum's Tank Room. *above*: Graham pulling out insect cases and studying botanical prints in the Department of Entomology.

from Max Barclay, Senior Curator in the department, the beetles and other specimens that feature in her work. Graham also has links with the research and archive departments at Kew Gardens, which began when two of her early drawings were acquired by collector Dr Shirley Sherwood and exhibited there. 'Shirley Sherwood bought work from the first show I ever did. This giant protea – a South African plant like an artichoke – was in an exhibition in the White Gallery at Kew. But most of her collection is to correct scale and form, an exact botanical rendering. My work doesn't really fit in; none of it has the scale and ferocity of mine. Mine is more about expression than accuracy.' Graham's 2018 series of paintings of *Medinilla magnifica* developed from studies of outstanding specimens in Kew's Princess of Wales Conservatory before being worked up in her studio from plants sourced at Covent Garden Market. Two of her drawings have been loaned to a travelling exhibition of botanical art by Rory McEwen (1932–1982) and followers, touring the USA in 2020.

Natural history is a subject fundamental to our human survival that has been studied continuously since the fourth century BC, the time of Aristotle. Any artist working from plants and insects will find themselves, tacitly or consciously, drawing on this body of historical research. The context for our looking plays a role in our perception too, and if this alters, our response to the work will change accordingly. The collector George Loudon has tabulated audience reactions to the nineteenth-century botanical teaching diagrams made by John Stevens Henslow, Charles Darwin's botany teacher, which are on display at Kew Gardens: 'on the whole people will walk right by them. They won't look for more than a second', but, he continues, 'if you hang them in the Serpentine Gallery in London people will say, "Hey, what's this?"' (George Loudon, *Object Lessons: The Visualisation of Nineteenth-Century Life Sciences*, Ridinghouse, London, 2015, p.71). Graham recognises how the affirmative visual beauty and strangeness of nature speak to modern sensibilities. Her drawing must be understood as an art form in its own right, despite its close affinities with a body of work referencing the science of botany. But if in the future one of Kew's curators should choose to show Graham's giant studies of *Medinilla* plants in the damp-sodden humidity of the Palm House, we will understand them differently all over again.

A detail of Graham's *Medinilla magnifica IX*, 2018.

RAINFOREST AT KEW GARDENS
Broad-leafed vegetation transpires, blooms and jostles for space in a living laboratory contained beneath a soaring canopy of glass and cast iron; here species including those that are endangered or extinct in their native habitats are studied for research into medicine or sustainable cropping.

Botany research trip to the nineteenth-century Palm House at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

‘Kew’s palm house yields a vast spectrum of potential subject matter for me. Home to the best tropical plant specimens.’

METHOD 1: NATURE, GRAPHITE

In a way, the drawings are much more about form; colour can be such a distraction. I got into using Conté crayon and charcoal, making the drawings look like black-and-white oil paintings. I like bringing the work down to the black and white of the graphite because then it really does vibrate; it has that drama.

'At first when I started painting again, I had sketchbooks', says Graham. At the age of 11 she had drawn a *Magnolia grandiflora* flower – 'not of the plant world, more like the papier-mâché models by Brendel in my studio' – with Durer-esque hyperrealism, as a gift for her mother. 'They have such strong forms, curled petals, they are seductive', she says. 'But I haven't drawn in sketchbooks since about ten years ago when I went to South Africa with my father. Now that stage all takes place in the studio.'

'I use dense graphite and an enlarged scope, to draw and then rub back to get further away from verisimilitude and closer to abstraction', she continues. 'The graphite pencils are just HB and 2B, but I use four whole boxes of them for each drawing. And I rely on an electric pencil sharpener, and after each drawing it will be worn out and I'll have to throw it away and buy another. I need to achieve this sfumato, tonal effect, this grisaille, this balance. I carry on until there's no sign of the human hand.' Her aim is to take each drawing to the brink of abstraction, translating back from nature, reducing her image to a gesture or motif. 'Best of all I like Renaissance drawing – Leonardo, Cranach and Holbein still excite me – and early works by Lucian Freud, who had prints after Rogier van der Weyden that Kenneth Clark gave him. With these there's no evidence of the artist's hand: it's almost photographic – just the tone.'

'Now I just want to draw and look; I'm looking for an expression. I see a curve or a twist or a pronunciation of some form that I've somehow got to get into the studio and magnify.' The resulting graphite works are much tougher, darker and mysterious paraphrases of nature, more cerebral, even, than the rest of her work. Her precedents come from the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, whose enlarged black-and-white images reveal the hypnotically powerful aesthetic of plant-form constructions, and the artist Graham Sutherland, who first trained, as she did, as a printmaker and

previous pages: Work in progress, on the studio floor: Graham relies on her decade-old colour reference chart and living botanical specimens for close-up study and comparison.

opposite: Brendel's papier-mâché models of plants furnish Graham's studio at Flood Street, Chelsea. Created as teaching aids for students at Bologna University, they can be dismantled into sections in order to demonstrate the make-up of stamens, petals, sepals, calyxes and other component parts.

Plant studies by Graham Sutherland made on 18 January 1962: two pages from his leather-bound sketchbook, now owned by Sarah Graham.

etcher. Sutherland's early works were mostly landscapes, painted on the Pembrokeshire coast in south-west Wales in the 1930s, but from this starting point he made forays towards a greater simplification and abstraction, a more surrealist expressivity. In simplifying what he saw Sutherland felt he was capturing the 'intellectual and emotional' essence of the landscape, 'darkness and light – of decay and life'. His images of trees and plants are skeletal and excoriated: biomorphic forms heightened by borrowings from a surrealist vocabulary. 'In his four studies for gorse on a sea wall you see the dark pointy shapes and motifs that run through his work. He took his original sketches, put a grid behind them and then blew them up back in his studio.'

Graham owns one of Sutherland's leather-bound sketchbooks full of his studies of plants and seed heads from this period. More recently she bought a pair of preparatory drawings for his seminal painting, *Entrance to a Lane* (1939; Tate). She has had his work in her mind's eye ever since she first saw his paintings at Saltwood Castle. 'What did inspire me was seeing them over the years on these dark, brocade-covered Gothic walls, hardly lit up at all, in rooms with heavy William Morris curtains. You would see these shadowy twisted forms of lanes and rocks in Wales – looking like something in the works of Francis Bacon – and gorse, which he would collect while walking and then draw at a much larger scale back in the studio. I used to pick up seed pods and draw them in black and white. I was making etchings and lithographs at Sherborne and Edinburgh, so there is a strong printmaking ethos in my work because everything is reduced to monochrome; it's all about laying down the mark.'

> *I draw organic forms enlarged and with their structures and veins heightened by sculptural shading and scale. Sometimes I take something of the grisaille, the metallic sfumato of a Blossfeldt photographic representation of a seed pod – which looks almost like an acanthus bud – and try to bring it into the texture of the drawing.*

Reading the works of Paul Nash was another revelation, providing Graham with the term '*genus loci*' to describe something she had already recognised but could not put into words: the spirit or guardian deity unique to a particular place and the way in which we experience it. She equates it with her feelings for the grass and scrub-clad terrain of Salisbury Plain and other familiar rural landscapes where human footfall gives way to nature. Nash was heir to the pastoralism of William Blake and Samuel Palmer, and the photographs he made in nature of tree trunks, rocks, walls and beach pebbles were simultaneously private receptacles for feeling and source material for his paintings. Graham appreciates the crepuscular mood of a Palmer or Sutherland etching, 'the gloaming time of day, when everything has been put to bed and the creeping shadows come out to play.'

opposite: A detail of Graham's drawing *Maenad*, 2009, one of the few early plant drawings still in her possession, which hangs on the wall of her Chelsea studio.

Each of Graham's drawings is composed across four sheets of hemp-fibre paper made in Nepal that has a lively and irregular textured surface. She says this is the perfect size and scale for her: anything larger would become too frieze-like and she cannot imagine drawing to a smaller scale. 'It's more to do with my character. For me the scale is essential because at that size it starts to reverberate. And I'm paraphrasing natural forms, so, once you put them on a huge scale, you're making them into an expression, multidimensional. And the forms you find in nature – rocks, bits of moss – as Sutherland did, are so much more interesting than the conceptual or the fashionable: they're forever fascinating.'

above: *Monster Field*, 1938, one of Paul Nash's photographs of uprooted elm trees in a Gloucestershire field, hangs in Graham's studio. The trees are an example of objects in nature that became the animated and dramatised vehicles for Nash's imagination.

A detail of Graham's decade-old colour reference chart, a large single sheet blotted with marks that provide an accurate register of all the coloured inks that she has used in her work .

METHOD 2: NARRATIVE, COLOUR, INK

Reducing colour down to the drama of black and white makes you concentrate completely on the form, not the narrative, not the decorative; there's a lot of narrative in the coloured works.'

Ink is a merciless medium: it cannot be removed, it dries in pools, and so mistakes and variations become part of the work.

Historically, botanical artists habitually took numbered colour charts with them when they went out into the field hunting for plants. With these to hand for reference they could draw their specimens in the uncertain conditions of tent or tundra and number each part with the correct pigment, to be added at a later date. The colour charts in Graham's studio are more spontaneous affairs: large sheets of paper blotched and puddled with gorgeous blots of ink. One lies on the floor next to the drawings on which she has just begun working. 'I've been using and referring to this for ten years. It keeps track of all the inks I've used', she says.

'I can't paint in oils. My way of working is much more exact; I can't wipe back. And you can't be messy with these natural inks', she explains. The coloured inks with which she has been working for about five years are compounds of the kind of plant-based dyes and iron-based mineral pigments that have been used throughout the history of art, and in the last decade she has become increasingly reliant on their unique properties.

Pigments made by these methods have their own special qualities: they are livelier and more subtle than chemically derived colours and like their natural components they can be fugitive. When her regular supplies of the midget-sized glass bottles sealed with wax and labelled in Gothic Blackletter script 'Kalligraphie-Schriebtinten' – Venus, Nachsilber, Feuergold, Blat Grune or Indigo Carmine – ran out, Graham flew to Switzerland to track down their reclusive makers. She found Beat and Christian Abraxas in Basel, brother apothecary-alchemists operating from a laboratory and a shop by the river in the old town. 'Their trade sign is a compressed pentagram. They're following seventeenth-century techniques', she says. 'Rose petals, sunshine and the full moon are part of the recipe and process of distillation. They catch rainwater

THE SWISS COLOUR ALCHEMISTS

opposite clockwise from top left: One of the Abraxas brothers in the apothecary shop in Basel old town to which Graham traced the traditional plant- and mineral-based coloured ink with which she has been working for over five years. From the ingredients through to the packaging, this ink could not be further from being mass-manufactured. The resulting ink is complex and subtle in colour, unusual tones not necessarily found among other makers. Sealing-wax sticks are used to seal each bottle after it has been filled. *above*: The Abraxas colour chart onto which the spectrum of available pigments has been added by hand.

opposite: Handmade inks from Abraxas. 'They catch rainwater and fix their colours with ground mica and other iron filaments; rose petals, sunshine and the full moon are part of the recipe and process of distillation.'

and fix their colours with ground mica and other iron filaments. Christian went to Aleppo just before Isis felled it and brought back ten bags of oak galls – they're beautiful, just like little ochre marbles.'

For sizes and grounds she goes to Pip Seymour, her supplier for bistre ink derived from birch and beech twigs burned to a tarry soot and bound with gum tragacanth, and black-brown sepia from the dried and ground ink sacks of Adriatic cuttlefish and oak-gall ink, both bound in gum arabic.

These subtle pigments have come to govern the directions in which her painting is developing. Halfway through working on her last show of paintings of *Medinilla magnifica*, a shrub or climber native to the Philippines with deep-green leaves and arching pendants of pink flowers with showy basal bracts, she ran out of the vivid pink that she was using and found there was no stock at any of her usual suppliers. 'I had to revert to a much stronger tone that I would never usually have chosen, because I'm more drawn to sombre palettes. The second half of the show was dictated by what I'd lost, but it turned out to be serendipitous in the end.'

'Now I'm making a series of paintings of *Meconopsis*, a Himlayan cousin of the poppy. It lives and dies so quickly. It has bright blue, bowl-shaped poppy-like flowers, and long golden hairs on its stems, buds and leaves. I found it

left: Mantelpiece in the Chelsea studio, a museum of curiosities including a medical student's teaching aid, preserved insects and an armillary sphere.

Chinese calligraphy brushes in Graham's Chelsea studio, behind which is a large scientific teaching chart of the pupal stages of a caterpillar, by Paul Pfurtscheller (an Austrian zoologist and natural history artist who produced a series of *Zoologische Wandtafeln* [Zoological Wall Charts] from 1902 onwards).

at the Chelsea Flower Show, which is where I get my inspiration, then in the same month Christian showed me Indigo Bleu and Indigo Grune at Abraxus. So, I am about to start using indigo – even the green is an indigo-green.'

'I buy my animal-hair brushes from the Asia Institute on Park Avenue [New York]. They're thick, teardrop-shaped. This enables me to get a heavy, loaded result, making sweeping Orientalist arabesques, like Chinese calligraphy. They capture and hold the colour. To stabilise the pools of ink I place my paper on the floor.'

'Painting directly onto white paper is too flat, too striking. So, regardless of whether I'm painting plants or insects, I do a flesh-coloured skin of under-painting, like a ground or wash fixed with gum arabic.'

'I've invented my own version of "*peau de crapeau*" [toad skin] in ink and gum arabic, an effect used in lithography. It gives a lovely sooty result when the natural sediments in the ink dry out. The inks then sit on these areas and make the most wonderful kind of mottled, lunar textures.'

'I mix the bistre with a bit of pink. I also mix my inks, the blue with the green. All the natural colours are fugitive and will fade. But you only get one chance. Ink can't be removed; I can't control the first washes.' Pinned up on her easel for the underdrawing, then down on the studio floor, the *Medinilla* began as a wash of flesh-like purply-pink, its full-cupped petals having a viscous quality. 'When it dries you get this stippled effect, almost like human skin', she says.

'When I'm drawing and I look up, I need to see all these references, all these objects; they keep me on the path, keep me centred. I grew up with skulls and fossils, and my father owned some glass prisms. He was fascinated by science and the way things worked, and had lenses, a pair of measuring scales, an ancient basalt stone scarab from Egypt. I found a perfect round stone at the confluence of two rivers, while walking in Scotland. It's like a cannon ball. I have nothing decorative though; I'm after form.'

'While I'm involved in a frenetic bout of painting I have to paraphrase life: I wear a uniform of boiler suits, I listen to the same line-up on Radio 4, I eat the same food, I eliminate choice so as to hold the image in my head.'

'I don't work from British flora and fauna; they're not Gothic enough.

The triffid-like plants from the tropics are larger and more spectacular than anything here – as is the giant mantid. The stag beetle is a European cousin of our indigenous ones. I spent a lot of my childhood drawing the dead ones I found in France, but I haven't got those drawings anymore.'

'And when I'm working from a plant or insect, there's a point when I put the object down. I drew some dried tree orchids – a species that leeches off its hosts, a symbiotic parasite – in a baroque and curling style: I always strive for that in a drawing. Subconsciously, I'm looking for that connection with architecture and sculptural form, like the work of Grinling Gibbons, and rococo and Gothic, I suppose.'

'Thinking too far ahead is destructive and demoralising. The distillation of things in my mind as I go along will determine the result. Now my drawings are liberated and expressive, and the further away I go from the orchid or the amaryllis, the more I enjoy it.'

'The trouble with some contemporary art is that it requires an explanation, and to me if you have to read about it and have it explained to you it doesn't really stand up on its own. Children look at conceptual art and say, "What is it?"'

Sarah Graham brings the natural world before us with a clear, unorthodox eye. Form comes into being with subtly coloured ink blushes, washes, stains and seepages. Mottled pools puddle and soak into the paper, drying to make the volumes of a glossy leaf or petal or the convex thorax of a butterfly. Squid-ink pools of darker brown-black map the stained-glass panel of an insect wing or an exoskeleton's segments; iridescent pools mark out the patterns of a moth's brown wing. Graphic, calligraphic dashes and delicate striations define sail-like butterfly-wing capillaries, bristling abdomen hairs, twiggy mayfly legs and proboscises. Savage, robotic insects hum and probe between flower petals; the heavy handmade paper bulges, saturated with colour. Nature requires no further manifesto or explanation. Her pictures are – in essence – about wonder and strange pleasures, engaging the eye and mind.

Final appraisal on the studio floor: 'While I'm involved in a frenetic bout of painting I have to paraphrase life: I wear a uniform of boiler suits, I listen to the same line-up on Radio 4, I eat the same food, I eliminate choice so as to hold the image in my head.'