

# Travels with my paintbrush

Sally Oyler's unique painting technique isn't just applied to her portraits of animals – it's all around the house

BY KATE PATRICK, PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN MACNICOL

**S**ALLY OYLER IS NOT entirely decided about whether she paints to travel or travels to paint. Her upcoming exhibition, "Four Continents and a Capital", is the result of three years spent combining her twin passions, and is her own humorous, painterly take on the animals, buildings and people she encountered on the way through India, Australia, Borneo, Zambia, Tanzania – and Edinburgh.

Don't, however, be fooled into thinking that Oyler is permanently on some kind of grand tour. She and her husband, chartered surveyor Patrick Gammell, also run the Uffizi Partnership in order to acquire and transform unloved, listed buildings in the Edinburgh area, such as the Leith Assembly Rooms, into appealing modern offices, combining the best of old and new ("uffizi" is the medieval Italian word for offices). Her role is hands-on, encompassing design, decoration and project management. The couple live in a Georgian manse in East Lothian, which has benefited both from Oyler's enthusiasm for colour and light, and their shared knack of identifying potential in any property.

Oyler studied at Gray's School of Art

in Aberdeen, but found little there to satisfy except that which was taught in graphic and textile design. After a post-graduate year at Manchester College of Art she set up a small printing company, designing logos and silkscreen printing. As part of doing "lots of mad, random things" she worked as a signwriter and produced logo T-shirts in Northern Australia to finance her travels. It was only after getting married that she started to paint for pleasure again, partly as a release from the constraints of motherhood.

**"My style owes something to Seurat"**

Her animal paintings in watercolour, acrylic, encaustic and oil combine the precise hand of the graphic designer with the artistic sensibilities of a pointillist. The images are instantly recognisable, and have an immediacy that doesn't demand too much of the viewer, which makes them good pieces for comfortable family homes and busy offices. More cartoonish than photographic, and playing with colour in a slightly pop-artish way, the pictures accentuate the more distinctive characteristics of a creature's physique: the mad eyes of an ibis in Australia, the scary, Dickensian mien of a ground hornbill in Tanzania, the haughty faces of camels in Rajasthan, or the

electrified spikes of an orang-utan's coat in Borneo, produced by blowing on a blob of paint to make it shoot out in crazy spikes.

"My husband calls my work 'splodgillism', but I think the correct term is divisionist," says Oyler. "My style definitely owes something to the impressionists and to Seurat, but it is also very

precise. It's not done randomly. There is always a lot of colour and texture, but I don't like large blocks of flat colour, so I wouldn't say I'm naturally in the pop art tradition either. One group of elephants I saw had purplish mud Wellingtons, which is why it seemed right to paint the whole picture in purple. When I look at an animal in

the wild I instantly see the humour in it."

Splodgillism is also in evidence around the old manse, where Oyler has had "a bit of laugh", as she puts it, sponge-painting the walls. Standing in the kitchen is like wallowing in a tequila sunrise, as the walls graduate from blood red to sunflower yellow around

you. A similar effect has been achieved in son Rory's bedroom, but with sub-aqua blues and greens that conjure up a sense of diving in a Caribbean lagoon, and the games room is like a basket of lemons. Oyler's upstairs studio is more peaceful: here they kept it plain, removed the ceiling, exposed the beams and added skylights to maximise the

**The "tequila sunrise" kitchen, main; Oyler, top; one of artist's works above a fireplace, right**

