



Sitting pretty

Tess Barnes has painted 50 Women of Substance, which is why she will be celebrating on National Women's Day, says LORRAINE CRIGHTON-SMITH

Local artist Tess Barnes counts Rebekah Wade and Zandra Rhodes among her sitters – and the list of famous females she has painted portraits of does not stop there. Her exhibition, 50 Women of Substance, opened at the Mall gallery on 25th February and is set to show the UK what girl power really means.

“March 8th is National Women's Day,” Tess informs me as we sit around the kitchen table in her house on Clapham Common. In fact, it was on National Women's Day 2006 that the sponsors, First Direct, gave Tess the green light on the exhibition. Without them Tess admits she would not have been able to do it: “I'm so chuffed that First Direct

sponsored the exhibition – they have such a lovely atmosphere. I get a feeling of equality from them, they're very warm and generous.”

“I fell into portraiture,” says Tess modestly. She trained at Chelsea College where her talent for producing portraits with a remarkable likeness to the sitter became apparent. Still underplaying her talent Tess reveals she believes “anyone can do it, if they put their mind to it” – although that's somewhat hard to believe when you're surrounded by her breathtaking works of art. A stunning drawing of her eldest daughter Emma sits on an easel overlooking the table and Tess' landscapes hang proudly on the walls.

From Chelsea Tess went on to study at

Goldsmiths College – a year below Damien Hirst. At Goldsmiths Tess was told that portraits are not art – but that didn't stop her. Tess went on to have two of her portraits selected for the B.P. Portrait Award exhibition and her work has been shown at the National Portrait Gallery and widely throughout London.

The inspiration for the exhibition 50 Women of Substance came shortly after Tess gave birth to her first child, Emma, who's now 15 years old. Tess became fascinated by womanhood and how many choose to return to the workplace after having children. “Previously I had always thought of (painting) men – chairmen, execs etc – but after I had my first child I felt an affinity with womankind and

it made me think ‘how do these woman juggle motherhood with a successful career? The child link was the main interest to begin with then it just became interesting,” she says.

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Tess contacted a list of women for the exhibition and asked them to sit for her, many of those women recommended others and Tess' list began to grow. “I met some brilliantly fascinating people from different walks of life,” she says, many of whom were so enamoured with their paintings that they bought them. Following on from her experience with the exhibition Tess has written a book, *Women of Substance: 50 Portraits of High Profile Women of Our Time*, and in doing so Tess learnt more about the women in question than in their sittings!

As well as the Clapham Common West Side home, the Barnes family also own a house in France, which provides an abundance of inspiration for Tess' landscape paintings. The Common, also, serves to inspire – she adores the light found there. “In the past few years I've become obsessed with light. I used to paint in very bright colours and once when I had an open house I saw all the paintings together and I felt like I was stuck in a rut,” says Tess, “So from then on I started trying to catch the light – and the new paintings started selling lots.”

Home is also a make-shift studio for Tess who paints the majority of her work there. “I've always painted where I live,” she says, as she is often painting late at night or whilst juggling chores and tasks. “I can often be found cooking with a paintbrush in my



mouth,” says Tess directing me to the self-portrait (she does in fact have a paintbrush in her mouth). Inspired by this typical vision of herself Tess sat and painted the self-portrait in a record few hours. Perhaps her kitchen is her muse? Tess tells me she loves working in the kitchen with the patio doors open leading out to the garden. “It's a really quiet location but you can nip down the road and be in Clapham. The only sad thing about this home is that we can't walk to the countryside!” ●

For more information visit www.firstdirect.com/exhibition
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Exhibition details:

LONDON

Mall Galleries, 17 Carlton House Terrace SW1Y; 020 7930 6844
Mon 25th Feb-Sat 1st March
10.00am-5.00pm

More dates to follow in:

LEEDS

4 Cross Arcade, Victoria Quarter, Leeds, LS1 6AZ; 0113 245 5333

OXFORD

Wolfson College, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD; 01865 274103

BIRMINGHAM

Royal Birmingham Society of Arts, Dakota House, 4 Brook Street, Birmingham, B3 1SA; 0121 236 4353

CAMBRIDGE

New Hall, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, CB3 0DF; 01223 762227

