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THE ARTIST & ST IVES

AUGUST 01, 2016 | CATEGORY: TRAVEL & PLACE | AUTHOR: SAHARA



The seas of West Cornwall are moody, endlessly changing their minds; sometimes turquoise and crystalline, sometimes warm and azure. In the colder months, when the days grow short and the wind bites at the coastline, foreboding granite waves smudge against dark skies like charcoal across paper. There is a wildness to this corner of the world that sets it apart; an otherness, a whispering suggestion that anything could happen. It's a mysterious thing that has resonated with artists and writers for centuries, pulling them back with the inevitability of the tides.



Virginia Woolf, who spent a childhood of summers in the Cornish harbour town of St Ives, recalled of the place that "nothing we had as children made as much difference, was quite so important to us." Although the holidays stopped after Virginia's mother died when she was 13, the place would later converge in the writer's memory with the ghost of her mother; the beach and the skies and the intermittent light of Godrevy Lighthouse spilling into what would become her magnum opus, *To The Lighthouse*.

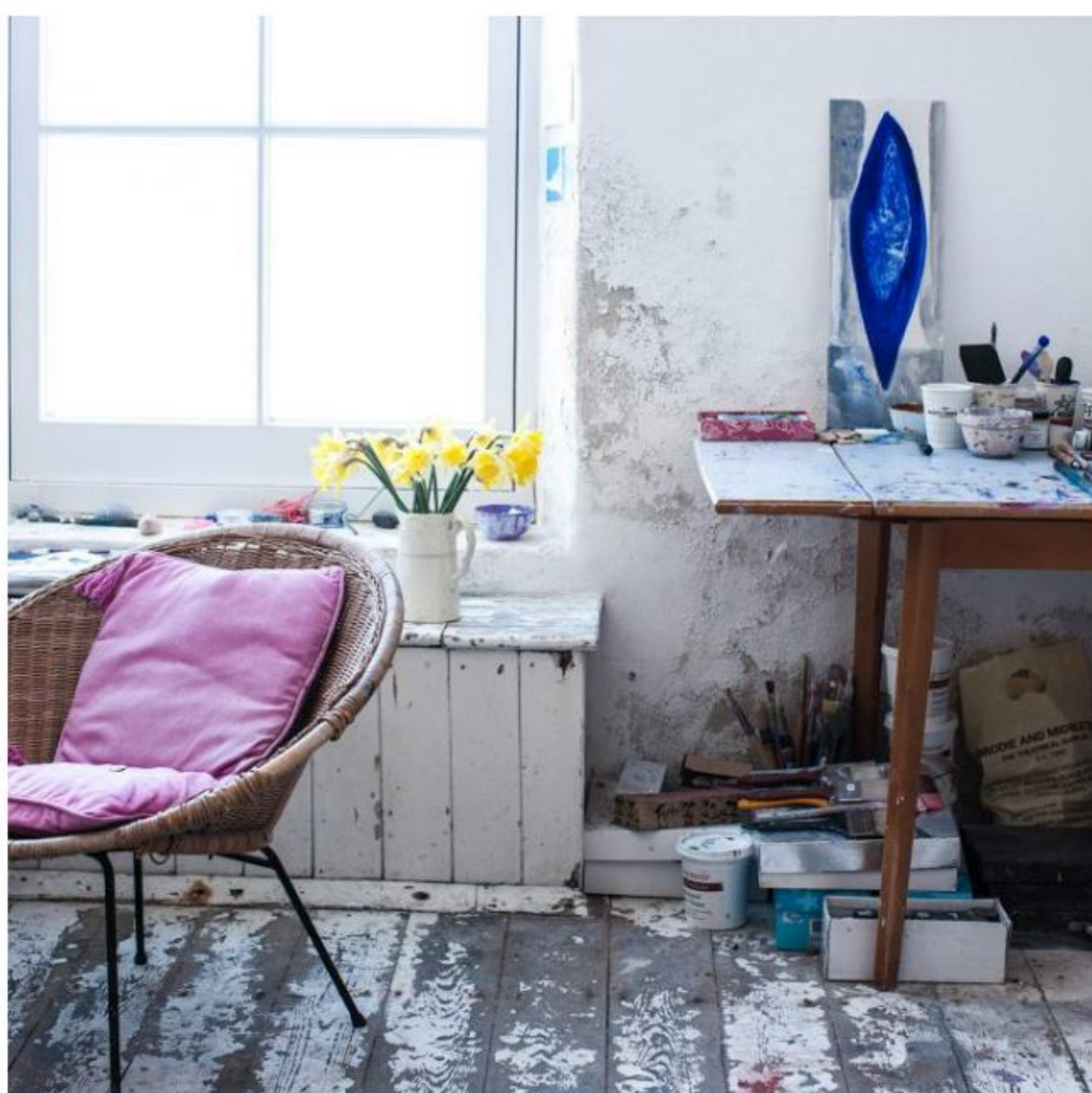
Haunted throughout her life by St Ives, Virginia is just one in a long list of creatives who have found themselves drawn repeatedly to that part of the coast. As with Paris or Giverny, St Ives possesses a unique quality of light; like moths, painters have gravitated towards it for almost two centuries, sketchbooks and battered suitcases rattling across the country on a steam train from London. Turner, Whistler, Sickert; all filled canvases with the harbour, the waves, the cliffs. The fishermen, living and working in the port, were immortalised in oil or watercolour, salt-stained muses with weathered hands and crinkled eyes. Through it all, Godrevy beats against the indecisive Cornish sky.



With the dawn of the 20th Century came new ideas, new technologies, new atrocities; but still, artists continued to return to St Ives. It became a place apart from fascism and post-war nihilism, somewhere that the Utopian ideals of international modernism could flourish. Fittingly, one of the greatest influences on the newly-formed St Ives School of the 1920s was himself a fisherman; with no artistic tuition, Alfred Wallis only began painting for comfort following the death of his wife. His 'naïve' style, ignoring perspective and scale, had an authenticity that was to put the elderly marine at the centre of some of the most progressive artists working at the time. He died, alone and penniless, in 1942. Today, his paintings sell for thousands.



As the world was dealing with the fallout of another war, St Ives was fast becoming an epicentre for the development of modern and abstract art. Young, disillusioned bohemians were drawn to the romanticism of the natural landscape. Artists and poets congregated to drink in taverns hidden amidst labyrinthine streets. Sculptures morphed from nothing beneath Barbara Hepworth's fingers. Francis Bacon's work changed irrevocably after the months he spent in the seaside town. Always the light, the lighthouse, the artist.



Today, St Ives overflows. Ice creams drip over sticky sunburnt hands, striped windbreaks swarm across the beach. Against the hum of busy cafes and restaurants, seagulls chatter over discarded chips and waves lick the curves of a hundred boats where they meet the water. In the harbour at St Ives, there is a car park and a public toilet. But the sea, the light, the air; here sleeps the eternal St Ives, the small town that Turner found two centuries ago. In a place that changes so much from day to day, still some things remain the same. Still, the air sings with salt and the whisperings of the waves; ancient moor, endless sky – all the land an art gallery.

"It still makes me feel warm," writes an older Virginia Woolf, separated from the place by a vast stretch of time and distance, but never quite away from it. "At times, I can go back to St Ives more completely than I can this morning."



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