

## Grounded, but not yet gone to ground

Emma Crichton-Miller visits an artist rooted in the West Country as he prepares for a solo exhibition of his paintings and prints at the start of his ninth decade

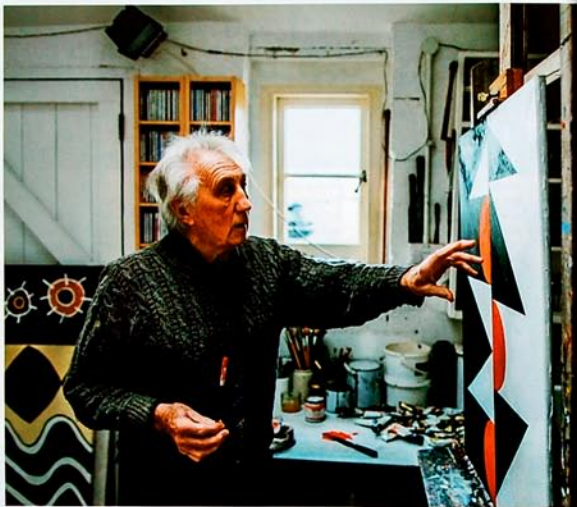
On a hillside above a beautiful valley, in the far south-western corner of Dorset, the painter Brian Rice has found his home, overlooking the village of Hewood, where the painter Lucien in Picasso once lived. He and his wife, fellow artist Lucy Wall, live in an immaculate, lime-washed thatched house, originally a simple Dorset hall house built of cob, chert and flint. Long and low, it was extended at the beginning of the 17th century and accrued a fine chimney, arched stone doorways, multi-paned windows and a date stone inscribed 1618.

In the attics, the couple has neighbouring airy studios; adjacent restored barns accommodate Mr Rice's larger print-making and painting. A tunnel of hazel has been trained over the track that leads down from the road and, all around, sheep graze. It's an idyllic context in which to find the artist, who is now 80 and still producing his thoughtful abstractions, rooted in the landscape he inhabits.

Next week, a solo show will open at his long-term gallery, Belgrave St Ives, to celebrate the publication of *Brian Rice: Paintings 1952-2016*. As this catalogue raisonné reveals, in the 1960s, Mr Rice was part of the swinging London art scene, painting boldly coloured, hard-edged geometric abstract works.

He had grown up in the Somerset villages of Tintinhull and Montacute and studied at Yeovil School of Art, before moving to London in 1958 to train as a teacher at Goldsmiths College of Art. A trip to the Sahara with two friends, including the Pop artist Derek Boshier, convinced him to become an artist and, so in 1962, after a period working in Montacute, he moved to Fulham.

At this point, he was exploring a distinctive, lyrical form



**Number One** (1960). This was painted in Mr Rice's parents' house in Montacute, Somerset, where he used a former battery-hen shed as a studio, before he went to London

The artist in the studio attached to his house, working on his playful abstraction *Zizzer* (2016)

of abstraction, owed equally to European and American precedents and to the English neo-Romantic painters he admired, such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland. Almost instantly, however, Mr Rice says, 'the painting became urban', reflecting both his immediate environment and the Pop aesthetic of the day. He hung out with Royal College of Art luminaries David Hockney, Joe Tilson, Allen Jones and Peter Blake and mingled with rock stars and fashion designers. Soon, his work was everywhere,



Above left: *Drawing No. 6 (Yellowfield)* (2001), an abstraction that alludes to the contours and rock strata that make up landscape. Above right: *Solstice* (1993) is part of a series of highly patterned gouaches inspired by prehistoric rock art

featuring in colour supplements and advertisements, on billboards and even in films. It captured the bright optimism of the era.

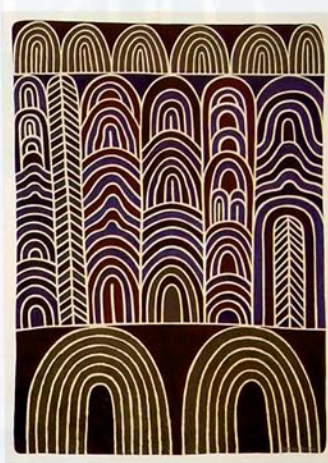
By the end of the 1970s, his painting had become rigorously systematic—flat, geometric rule-bound arrangements of colour. 'I had painted myself into a corner', he says. And so, with a friend, he bought a 50-acre sheep farm on the site of an ancient hill fort in a remote part of west Dorset and, for three years, he immersed himself in caring for the land, tending sheep and restoring the 17th-century farmhouse; it felt 'like coming home'.

And then, one day, while clearing a field, he came upon the trigger for his reinvention. Beneath the soil, he discovered some old cobbled floors and pottery shards, including a fragment of 18th-century pottery marked with the face of a Green Man. Archaeologists from Dorchester investigated, uncover-

ing evidence of a Bronze Age settlement beneath the layers of later habitation and encouraging Mr Rice's enthusiasm for archaeology.

He produced a series of gouaches—*Thau* (1981), *Askerswell Hoard* (1982), *Wessex Landscape* (1982)—which, full of texture and rhythm, hark back to his earliest paintings. 'It was digging into history at Nallier's Farm that inspired me to, tentatively, start painting again. Mark-making inspired by prehistoric symbols and ancient landscape—abstracted but not abstract.'

Mr Rice was later forced to sell the farm, but, on a cycling holiday in 1983, pausing for breath at the top of the hill, he came upon the ruins of New House. Once again, he got



stuck in. For 10 years, he worked on the building, stripping it back to the caves. He unearthed 15,000 shards of pottery, all of which he has kept, and scraped back the walls to their original plaster. Here, over the past 33 years, he has developed a significant body of paintings, gouaches and prints.

These build on his original commitment to abstraction, but

are enriched by a symbolic depth and a wide variety of colours and textures, drawing on imagery as various as aerial photographs of ancient sites, the patterns of African textiles, the inscrutable symbols inscribed on rocks and megalithic tombs. Most recently, he has even returned to his earlier geometric patterns, in paintings such as *Sizipzer* (2016). These reveal a new playfulness, as if, reconnected with the source of their human significance, the motifs can now dance with confidence and joy.

*Brian Rice: Paintings and Prints from the Artist's Archive* is at Belgrave St Ives, 22, Fore Street, St Ives, Cornwall, from March 6 to 27 (01736 794888; [www.belgrvestives.co.uk](http://www.belgrvestives.co.uk)). All works in the show are for sale.

**Next week:** 'Degas to Picasso' at the Ashmolean



**Sector No. 2** (1968) is a screenprint full of geometric bravura