

PUZZLING IT OUT

Words & photography
Kathryn Reilly

On the eve of a major solo show at Linden Hall Studio, Arthur Neal talks about the “madness” behind his methods

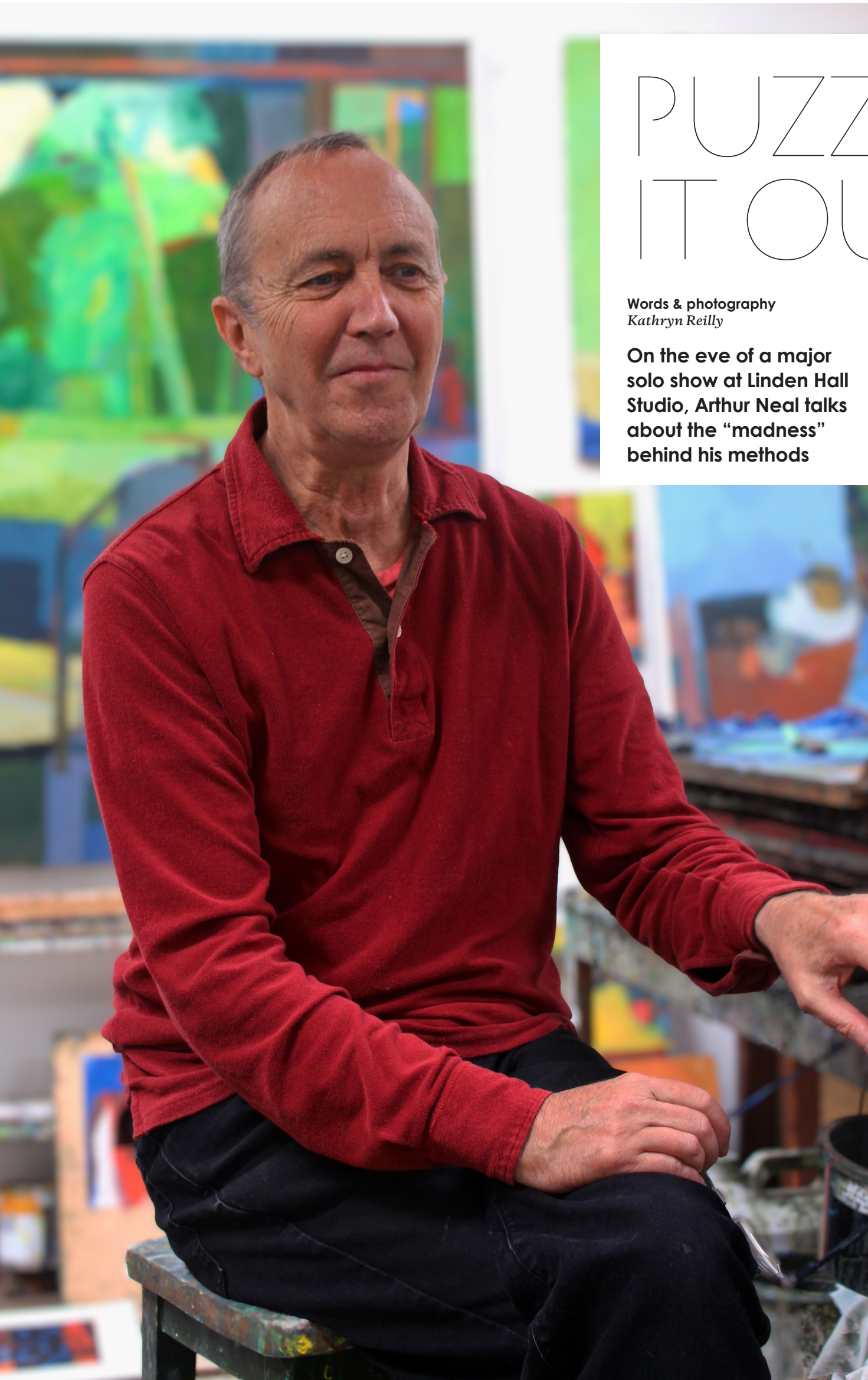
For a man so unassuming, Arthur Neal sure knows how to tell a good story. During our interview (ostensibly about his work, inspiration and practices), we tangentially touched on a coal pit visit in the 1980s, an outraged portrait sitter, Deal’s floods and emptying bins in Green Park. A youthful 70 years of age, Arthur has lived an interesting life – 45 years of which have been here in Deal. “I’m still a DFL,” he smiles. The town has “a reassuring sense of impermanence,” he says.

The New English Art Club website claims “Arthur’s method of working is prolonged, procrastinated messy chaos, occasionally organised chaos.” A sentence which sounds very much like Arthur speaking. He claims to only have been satisfied with two paintings during his entire career – and you believe him. He is as mystified by the process now as when he began art school in the late 1960s.

“I chose Camberwell because it’s emphasis was figurative and I was painting abstracts at the time – I thought it would be a challenge. I was certainly challenged. And maybe even flattened,” he laughs. Provocative and conflicting criticism left him confused and frustrated. So he became a farm hand for six years. “I’d had enough – I couldn’t solve the problem. I was trying to paint like de Kooning. I couldn’t finish anything.” The art only started up again when he illustrated, printed and bound a book of Edward Thomas’s poetry. The limited run was snapped up and a second one was commissioned.

He then began teaching – firstly at the Metropole Art Centre at Folkestone and then at Maidstone College of Art. “I was quite stropic,” he admits. “It was serious stuff, no talking in class – that’s how Euan Uglow taught me”.

You can tell an Arthur Neal when you see one. His work possesses a mesmerising balance of colour and form – something difficult to define and even more difficult to achieve. “There are artists that do accumulative pictures – they know what they want to achieve and it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Whereas mine can start off as a still life, then it could have four people in it – it will evolve, I respond to what happens on the board, really. Even figuration to me is abstract. It’s all about structure – it’s







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like a Rubik’s cube, you have to solve the problem.” Crucially, he works on board so that he can scrape paint away - as is evidenced by his sculptural easel, a work of art in itself.

One of his favourite subjects is the view from his studio, at the end of the garden, which he’s painted well over 30 times “reinventing it - it’s the sense you have not done it yet. That’s my inspiration”. He mentions Philip Guston’s quote about all outwardly things disappearing until you do yourself (“one by one if you’re really painting, they walk out. And if you’re really painting YOU walk out”). “There’s a point when you’re not making judgements,” he says. “You see it in sport. Tim Henman’s the classic example - you watch this naturally gifted player and you can see the moment he realises he’s playing well. And then it just goes out the window.”

Arthur often has 40-50 paintings on the go. So when does he deem them fit to fly the nest? “They have to go through the process. First they go out on to the patio. Sometimes I immediately think ‘you’re joking’ and they come back in. But sometimes they go into the house, first above the telly, then on another wall. Then I can catch it unawares; come to it fresh. If it gets that far, I put some battening around it to separate it from the wall. I might continue working on it - I sometimes do that even when they’re framed.”

Recently inspired by a performance at St George’s during the Deal Festival by pianist Dinara Klinton, from which several paintings have sprung, he says he is trying to “understand red”. His is a process of continual change, including turning paintings upside down. “It’s good to get frustrated with a piece because you’re reacting to it.” Most paintings conclude by accident, he believes. “What are the rules?” he ponders, rhetorically. “The danger is you end up ‘tidying up.’” Although he’s more relaxed about his work now, he’s still almost as anxious about it, and invariably self-effacing.

Asked what his plans for the future are, he quips “well time’s running out, which is why diving boards are appearing in so many of my works!” And he’s still trying to crack the code. “What’s colour for, does it have a function? It’s a kind of language. The early painters had much greyer palettes, which I love. Why aren’t I doing that, why is that in my paintings. So I’ll attempt to work that one out. It goes beyond subject matter.”

For now, his biggest solo exhibition so far means there’s a little more space in his studio. But not for long, I’ll wager.

70+ A retrospective
5-26 November,
Linden Hall Studio