

LIFESTYLE

Nature magnified

From her studio in Chelsea, SARAH GRAHAM creates magnificent pictures of exotic plants, flowers and insects, which have been inspired by her lifelong fascination with the natural world

TEXT HUGH ST CLAIR | PHOTOGRAPHS GREG FUNNELL



Sarah in her nineteenth-century studio, looking at paintings for her upcoming exhibition. The space is furnished with an Arts and Crafts rug and table, the latter of which is home to Sarah's found objects ▶



It would upset me greatly if someone said my work was pretty,' declares painter Sarah Graham. If pretty is defined as fine and delicate, the adjective certainly does not apply. The works in her upcoming exhibition are nearly two metres wide and one metre high. They have a majestic, muscular quality, an almost abstract and surreal feel in their magnificence. These are not, as she is keen to stress, botanical paintings but expansive and personal interpretations of colourful specimens, such as lilies, orchids and artichokes.

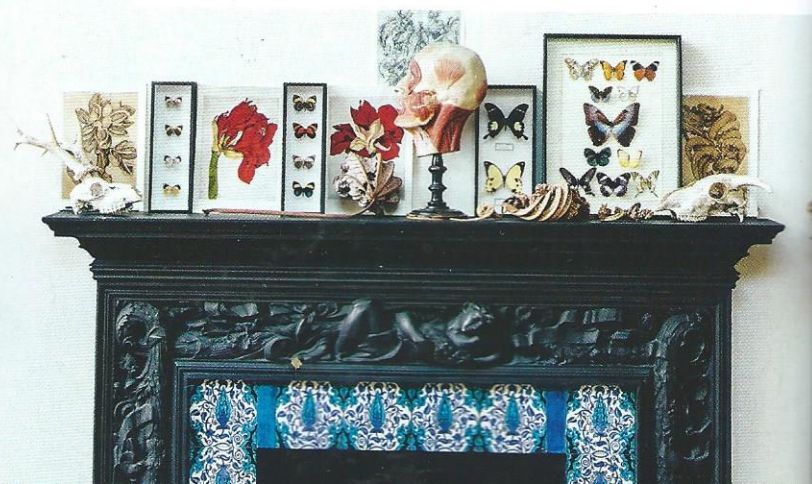
She works from a nineteenth-century artist's studio in Chelsea, where light floods in from the two-metre windows onto an Arts and Crafts Puginesque table displaying her found objects: dried seed pods, fossils and animal skulls. A long dried amaryllis branch propped up against the turquoise-tiled chimneypiece seems almost triffidian. She is currently preparing for her first New York show, having had sell-out shows in Aspen, Colorado and at Sims Reed Gallery in London. 'Plants are my main subject, but I am very drawn to the forms of insects, too,' she says. In 2010, for the exhibition in Aspen, she tentatively submitted large-scale drawings of beetles, cicadas and butterflies among her flower pictures. 'I expected buyers to recoil, but to my surprise the insect pictures were snapped up immediately.' Thus emboldened, for a London show a year later, she submitted a giant leaf-eating mantid, a whip scorpion and a stag beetle, which also sold.

The natural world was very much part of Sarah's childhood. She recalls her mother's luxurious magnolias and her father's vivarium full of grass snakes and stag beetles. At Saltwood Castle in Kent, the home of her godmother Jane Clark, she saw the landscapes of artist Graham Sutherland. She found 'his dark and mysterious paraphrases of nature' compelling and was fascinated by the ambiguity between plant and animal forms. 'Sutherland always sits on my shoulder as a lodestar. If I feel lost with finding something to draw, I will turn to one of his images.'

Her other influence is early-twentieth-century German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, whose photographically enlarged plants highlight their structure and become



THIS PAGE FROM TOP Sarah sits on a chaise longue surrounded by books on Georgia O'Keeffe, Albrecht Dürer and Shirley Sherwood; behind her hangs a three-metre charcoal 'warm-up' drawing on parcel paper. A selection of Sarah's paintbrushes and other tools. A detail of *Pirus*, an ink drawing for her upcoming New York show. A chimneypiece topped with boxes of butterflies from Deyrolle in Paris. OPPOSITE Sarah working on *Orchis* and *Taraxacum*, pieces for the show



*Ink is a merciless medium
– once it's on the paper, it's
there for good. But I love how it
dries, often in uneven pools*

