

Interview

# 'I went into a cold flurry and fell down my steps' - painter Kathryn Maple on her John Moores win

*Louis Wise*

**She wanted to be a stuntwoman but didn't have good balance. Now she's following in David Hockney's footsteps, winning the prestigious prize for a work that speaks to the Covid crisis**



📷 'We're human! We need interaction' ... Maple in her studio. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi/The Guardian

**W**hen Kathryn Maple won the prestigious £25,000 John Moores painting prize earlier this month, the judges said her picture, a dense two-metre-square scene called *The Common*, embodied “the deeply social nature of humans”. After a year of enforced isolation, it seems a timely theme - but is it what she intended?

It’s a bright but chilly afternoon as the Maidstone-raised artist joins me for a socially distanced walk around Hilly Fields, wrapped in two fleeces. It was here, in this London park, that Maple first did preparatory sketches for the work, which features a dozen figures defined by rich pinks, reds and blues, thronging among a vibrant backdrop of foliage.

“You could read it a couple of ways,” she says. “As something that you’re wanting, or as a memory of times. We’re humans! We need interaction.” The funny thing is, when she first conceived the image, she didn’t really think that the figures were interacting at all. She was more inspired by all the people she’d see walking about but looking down at their phones: “Just in their own bubble, not really aware of each other.”

When she finished it and entered it in the competition last winter, the coronavirus was still a distant news item in China. She couldn’t have imagined how the judges would respond to it, but she now understands their reading of the work: it’s as if they’re willing the different figures to be together, as if they have a need to see it that way. The painting, she says, “has that sort of *suck*. That emotion and feeling.”





📷 'Deeply social' ... The Common.  
Photograph: Liverpool  
Museums/PA

We are meeting the day after her win. Maple, tall, striking, with a short crop of brown curls, is still “buzzing” and has barely slept since she was told about it. “I went into a cold flurry!” she says. She got so distracted she fell down the steps in her flat, which she shares with her girlfriend, a fellow painter she met while studying at the Royal Drawing School in London.

This buzzing is understandable. The win is a huge breakthrough. As well as the cash, Maple will have an individual exhibition at Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery, where *The Common* will appear on permanent display. “You always hope your work will get into a national collection,” says Maple, who still seems a bit shocked. “So you can return to see it when you’re 80 with your friends.”

Maple now follows in the footsteps of such previous winners as Peter Doig, Rose Wylie and David Hockney. Doig is a particular hero and influence - both share a love of the luxuriant and mysterious side of the natural world. This is very much Maple’s patch: in fact, she has rarely featured people in her work. “I just love being outside as much as possible,” she says. “I get really itchy!”

When we set up the interview, she mentioned tree-climbing in the park, which I took to be a joke. But as we stride along, I realise she may have been serious - because Maple doesn’t limit her creativity to painting. She also teaches, gardens and, only a month ago, completed the first training level for becoming a tree surgeon. “I’ve got a chipping licence,” she says, “a chipper and a strimmer!”



📷 'I just keep going and going and going' ... Maple, who is also training to be a tree surgeon.  
Photograph: Christian  
Sinibaldi/The Guardian

Maple is the only child of an architect father, who died when she was 11, and a retired shopkeeper mother. She thinks that, if the artistic side came from anywhere, it was from him: “I’ve been sent messages from family and friends saying he’d be so proud.” Although being outdoors is what primarily inspires her, she does enjoy other great painters of nature, such as Turner and his skies, and Van Gogh, particularly his orchard series and his ink drawings. Yet she really doesn’t present doing art as some great predestined thing, crediting instead a teacher who encouraged her at A-levels. After those, she studied printmaking at Brighton University, before getting to the Drawing School in 2013.

“When I was younger,” she says, “I always wanted to be a stuntwoman, or something, but I really don’t have good balance. So I think I’d have died.” She laughs. “And I love waitressing, so who knows? I could have been doing that full-time.” Maple has a giddy excitement that she can barely contain. She has tried, during lockdowns, to sit still more, but it’s a struggle. “I don’t really get knocked back,” she says. “I just kind of get on my own track. I just keep going and going and going.”

This drive came in handy during the last 12 months, when the art world went into a deep freeze. While it’s in her nature to be positive and grateful, she says it’s a scary time for her and her fellow artists. She benefited from the [SEISS](#) grants, which helped cover the cost of a studio and food. But has the government done enough?

**▲▲ It would be fun to have big buckets of paint lined up ready**

“I don’t think they did at first, but I think it’s better now,” she says cautiously. “It’s going to take so much for those museums to reopen - it’s so worrying.” She does feel that the government is finally conceding the vast importance of the culture sector - something she thinks the public cottoned on to much earlier.

She was heartened by the creation of the [Artist Support Pledge](#), where artists sell work and pledge to buy another artist’s once they had reached the goal of £1,000. She did it herself and made enough to buy three other pieces. “It definitely helped me with bills and stuff.”

The next thing is to get started creating new work for the solo show, which will open at the Walker next year. She talks of being inspired by TV programmes about great painters. “I see those documentaries where people have these big buckets of paint,” she says excitedly. “It would be really fun to have a succession of buckets, lined up with loads of paint - just ready to go!”