

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL PATRICK LILLEY

LIFE IN FULL COLOUR

As wife of the brilliant but 'extremely demanding' artist Roger Hilton, she put his career first – and hers on hold. Now, at 81, Rose Hilton is making up for lost time. By KATE SALTER

Every day Rose Hilton drives from her home in the village of Botallack in west Cornwall to her studio in Newlyn, a picturesque hamlet on one side of the bay of Penzance. Her studio, a room in a converted school, has high ceilings and large windows from which she can see a huge expanse of sky and the clouds rushing by. 'I absolutely love it here,' says Hilton. 'I never get tired of the light.'

Hilton has the kind of enthusiasm you might expect from an artist – but not necessarily from one who is 81. Known for her use of rich colour and post-Impressionistic style (Matisse and Bonnard are clear influences), she is not only painting more now than when she was married to Roger Hilton, one of the leading lights of British abstract art, but is developing her style, experimenting with colour and abstraction. Next week an exhibition of her work opens at Messum's art gallery in London.

She cuts a fashionable figure – tall and slim, dressed in a mohair cardigan, a leopard-print scarf, beige trousers and the kind of footwear (perforated rubber ankle boots) usually seen on young hipsters in east London. Hilton's dedication to painting is partly a result of the fact that she has had to overcome so many obstacles to get here.



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She fought the disapproval of her parents in going to art college, survived a bout of tuberculosis that left her hospitalised for a year, and managed to nurse her artistic ambitions through a rocky marriage to Roger Hilton, who, to all intents and purposes, forbade her from painting while they were married.

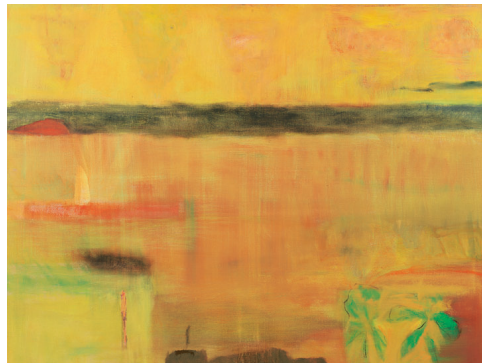
Hilton (née Phipps) was born in the village of Leigh, in Kent, the fourth of seven children. Her parents were Plymouth Brethren, strict Protestants who ran a tea shop and post office in the village. They allowed her to go to Beckenham School of Art only if she agreed to become an art teacher, rather than an artist. She won a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and, when her parents refused to let her go, it was her elder brother who persuaded them to allow her to accept the place. 'In those days,' Hilton says, 'you didn't really leave home until you got married. That's what my sisters did.'

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her, but they began a relationship, moved in together and had a son, Bo.

Around this time Roger explained to her how he wanted their relationship to function. 'He said, "Well, this seems to be working, but, if we're going to be together and get married *I'm* the painter in this set-up."' She smirks slightly, and shrugs. 'I know it's terribly un-feminist, but I just said, "Well, that's fine."' She was so in love with him, and so taken with motherhood, that his not approving of her painting didn't seem to be a problem at first.

After their second son, Fergus, was born Roger suggested they move to Botallack. Despite the remote location and the fact that Rose knew nobody there, she says she was happy. 'I was in love with Roger, we had two small children, and it was quite a happy time. The only drawback was he got very friendly with a Scottish poet called Sydney Graham [WS Graham].' Roger and Graham began



Paintings from Hilton's new exhibition include (from left): *The Red Room*, *Woman Sleeping*; *Looking Towards the Lizard Peninsula*; and *Serendipity*

Hilton rented a room in London, which resulted in her father telling her that he wasn't sure she'd be welcome at home again at the weekends (he relented). She loved art college so much, she says she 'went a bit wild and didn't eat properly'. When she was diagnosed with TB she was forced to leave college and move into a sanatorium for a year. Her mother told her that it was God's punishment. However, after a new treatment proved successful she was able to leave hospital and go back to the RCA, where she flourished. A contemporary of artists such as Bridget Riley, Peter Blake and Robyn Denny, she graduated in 1957 with the RCA's equivalent of a first (her mother refused to go to her graduation ceremony).

In 1959 she and a friend hitch-hiked to Cornwall and visited Roger Hilton in his studio in Newlyn. They had met two years earlier but, by the time Rose visited Cornwall, Roger was divorcing his first wife. 'He was so like his painting,' she says. 'Forthright and with a real presence. He was an interesting man, very different to any of the things I'd been brought up with. He was fascinating to me.' He was also 20 years older than

to spend all their time together drinking. Hilton describes an environment that became suffocating and unsettling, where everything began to revolve around Roger's work and his drinking. 'It was all around,' she says. 'I wasn't painting myself, but I was looking at his pictures all the time.'

Although there was a lively art scene in Cornwall, Hilton says they didn't have much of a social life. 'Roger was *not* good in social situations,' she says. 'He got banned from so many pubs and he was always falling out with someone. We weren't asked out to dinner very often.' There were terrible rows. 'I did drink a bit myself, too, but coming from a big family and having three younger brothers and sisters, I didn't slip up. Supper was always ready and I was always there to collect the children. But they did hear the quarrels,' Hilton's role was to fetch her husband's art supplies. 'He used to make lists of what paints he wanted. I'd go and get them, but if I forgot something he'd be angry,' she says.

Hilton says it was she who bore the brunt of his alcoholism and mood swings. 'He was always very nice to the boys. He used to shout at me, but he loved his boys.' She describes taking the boys out

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on to the cliffs in desperation when her husband and Graham would be in the midst of a drinking session. It sounds thoroughly miserable, I tell her. She admits it was, but she is never self-pitying and says she loved Roger deeply despite his difficult character. 'Besides,' she adds with a chuckle, 'it wasn't like being married to a bank manager.'

She says that throughout her marriage she continued to paint a little when Roger was out. One day he came home from a drinking session and told her, 'I *know* you've been painting because I can smell the turps.' She says this now with a laugh, even though at the time it must have been terrifying. 'He asked me to show him what I'd been doing. There were three small paintings, which I brought down rather nervously. He looked at them for a long time and then said, "Well, if you must do this old-fashioned painting, I can help you do it better."' She says she learnt more in the following hour than in her entire time at college.

Roger Hilton made many attempts to tackle his alcoholism, but he always returned to drinking. Towards the end of his life he was drinking a bottle of whisky per day and smoking 500 cigarettes per week. He became more and more ill and for the last four years of his life lived in a downstairs studio at the back of the house. By that time his wife was doing almost everything for him. Still painting, he had a bell installed that he used to communicate with the rest of his family. 'One ring was for Fergus to come and change his paint water, two was for Bo to go and play chess with him, and three was for me to take him his dinner.' Roger was now drinking more than he was eating but, she says, he never lost his taste for delicacies. 'He'd make all these fanciful lists of stuff I couldn't possibly get. Things you could only get in Soho, like caviar. There was an oyster farm on the Lizard peninsula, so I'd drive over there to buy his oysters.'

It seems amazing that, for a woman with such character, the situation was at all tolerable. Why did she put up with it? She says that women today might find it hard to understand, 'But it was a very different time. People had broken through, such as the Bloomsbury Group and women like Edith Sitwell,' she says. 'But from my background, men were still to be deferred to.' She also makes the point that, in a way, Roger was right about there not being room for two artists, at least from a practical point of view. If one is to paint obsessively, as many artists do, there is little room for the ordinariness of daily life. Someone needed to 'keep the show on the road', as she puts it.

In 1975 Roger Hilton died. Rose was distraught, but at the same time vowed to dedicate herself to

painting. 'When Roger died I did think, "I'm not going to venture on marriage again - I'm going to do painting."' At first painting was 'company' for her, and a way of getting over Roger's death. But after 10 years of painting she had her first solo exhibition at the Newlyn art gallery, and was asked to join Messum's gallery in London as a result.

Roger's death also meant that their children, who were only nine and 13 when he died, could begin to have a more stable upbringing, albeit without a father. 'Things returned to a kind of normal in their teens,' she says. The boys would come back from school, play with friends, surf, and 'it sort of evened itself out. But,' she continues, 'there are theories, and I'm inclined to believe them, that children are really formed from one to seven.' Hilton says she still feels terrible guilt about the early years of her sons' childhood, the legacy of their father's alcoholism and the ensuing chaos.



Roger and Rose in 1973 with their sons Fergus, left, and Robert (known as Bo)

One day he came home from a drinking session and told her, 'I know you've been painting because I can smell the turps'

It is clear that Hilton's passion for painting has been made stronger by the many years she was forced to stall her own career. She shows me a painting in brilliant red, pink and orange and says it's an example of her experimentation with abstract form. It's supposed to be included in the upcoming show, 'But,' she says, mischievously, 'I like it so much I might take it home with me again.'

When she's not painting she spends her time entertaining at her house, and sings in a church choir on Sundays. Although she says she now gets tired in the afternoon, it's hard to imagine her putting her feet up for long. 'I thought I'd use these last years of energy to experiment with colour,' she says, eyes twinkling. 'I just feel so lucky to have had this time to paint. I don't want to waste it.' ●

'Rose Hilton 2012' runs from Wednesday to 10 November at Messum's, London W1 (messums.com)