

# Quiet jewels of the night

Renowned artist responsible for this issue's cover art, James Gillick, shares an insight into his life and artistic mind.



Interviewing James Gillick is an incredibly philosophical and enlightening process. The softly spoken artist comes across as wise, gentle and humble as well as obsessive, intense and assiduous. Best known in shooting circles for his subdued oil paintings of hanging game, his refreshing take on modern life seems to hark back to a long-forgotten era. His natural, simple way of living is something we can all learn from. You won't know anyone like him and he will leave you feeling reflective and introspective. He embodies rural living and the self-imposed hardship of an artist, albeit an extremely successful one with an international following. He tells *Fieldsports* why serving the shooting community is one of his greatest passions. ➔

### So, who is James Gillick?

I am 47 years old and have been based in the Lincolnshire Wolds for two decades. Last year my wife and I bought a big, isolated and neglected Arts and Craft thatched house in the North Wolds. It is a restoration project that the whole family will be involved in (it is now finally watertight!). I am part of an enormous, artistic family. My great aunt Mary Gillick was a relief sculptor best known for the image of Elizabeth II used on all post-decimal UK and Empire coinage. My great uncle Ernest Gillick was a well-known sculptor who carved some of the figures on the façade of Marble Arch and the Victoria & Albert Museum. My cousin Liam Gillick was a Turner Prize nominee and is quite the big cheese in the arts. My twin brother Theo is also a celebrated sculptor. I have eight, home-schooled children – six sons and two daughters – ranging from four months to 21 years old, all of whom show artistic tendencies. I am married to my childhood sweetheart, Miriam who is a typically remarkable modern woman in the way she calmly manages a vast workload. She is my hero.

### Tell us the story behind the ‘Goodberry Partridge’, the painting on the front cover of *Fieldsports Journal*.

The painting belongs to Ben and Clare Goodberry, a couple based near London. They commissioned me to paint a brace of English partridge in 2015 after they saw a similar painting of woodcock owned by a colleague. Few people deliberately shoot grey partridge in the Wolds so these were sourced from a well-known Wolds game dealer, John Coppin. They were painted over two or three weeks using oils onto linen stretched over a panel. I always paint specimens from life, never frozen and defrosted as I find it wrecks their feathers and, defrosted, they are bit more lifeless, somehow. If it is a cold winter, we do eat the birds after I have finished – we like them quite ‘blue’ as it tenderises the meat and gives it character.

### What involvement do you have with fieldsports? Do you shoot/hunt/fish?

I do not shoot, although my older children go beating and my daughter, Pia helps to rear birds for a lovely local shoot. The sporting and shooting season happens to be my busiest time of the year as I prepare for the summer exhibitions. Once or twice during the winter I will have to paint four days in a row without going to bed – adopting a repeating cycle of three hours work followed by 15 minutes sleep to get work done. And, ridiculously, I live for these Winter



moments; they make me feel invigorated.

What’s more, I have a very traditional view of what an artist’s role is. I am not a gentleman or a landowner – I don’t think my role is to join them in the field and I can’t contribute meaningfully to the things that need to be discussed after the shooting is done! I am an observer and I commentate on what I have seen from a distance. I often wish I could join in as I think I have good eye-hand co-ordination, but that’s just the way it is.

### Why hanging game?

In the season, my wife has birds delivered in the feather to us all the time; it’s the way the Wolds work. We currently have a brace each of mallard, snipe and partridge, rabbits and three of pheasant. I’ll paint the snipe, mallard and partridge – the family will prepare the rest for the oven. In winter, gamebirds are part of our way of life and part of a rural cycle. People often ask me why I paint game that is hung by its feet rather than neck, as is done in real life. Artists have

almost always depicted game in this way because it opens up the beauty of the wings and aesthetically, it can be quite grim to look upon a bird or mammal that is hung by its neck in a painting. I am using my artistic licence, I guess.

### What or who are your influences?

When I was young, I admired a 17th century Spanish painter named Velázquez. He is a painter’s painter. I also identify with him because he had such a happy married life.

### Do you listen to anything while you work?

No; I paint in silence. I get consumed by my work. Very few people get to concentrate on just one thing as I do so why ruin the privilege?

### Describe your studio.

I have two studios – two big, unheated agricultural buildings. At home I have a huge, converted 1950s pig shed. My other studio is a converted lawnmower repair workshop in the centre of Louth. There is no seating, no radio, no carpet in either – just simple concrete floors. Both have north-facing skylights which let in the natural light I work by. They are quite dark and messy, but not unordered. Outside my home studio there are free-range chickens, a peacock and a beautiful sweeping view over the Wolds.

### Do you have a dog?

No, I have eight children instead!

### What was the very first painting you sold?

It was a simple still life – pears in a grey bowl with a grey jug. I like simple, natural things; it’s where I find beauty.

### Which painting are you most proud of?

That is a difficult one to answer. I would not continue to

paint if I had been satisfied by one painting. I try to create something perfect, pure and succinct every year. I am never fully satisfied.

### Which modern day artists do you admire?

I admire anyone turning in a good, sincere career. I don’t care much for fashion as you may have guessed! ‘Fashionable’ paintings usually end up being put in a skip by the next generation.

### Tell us about the painting process.

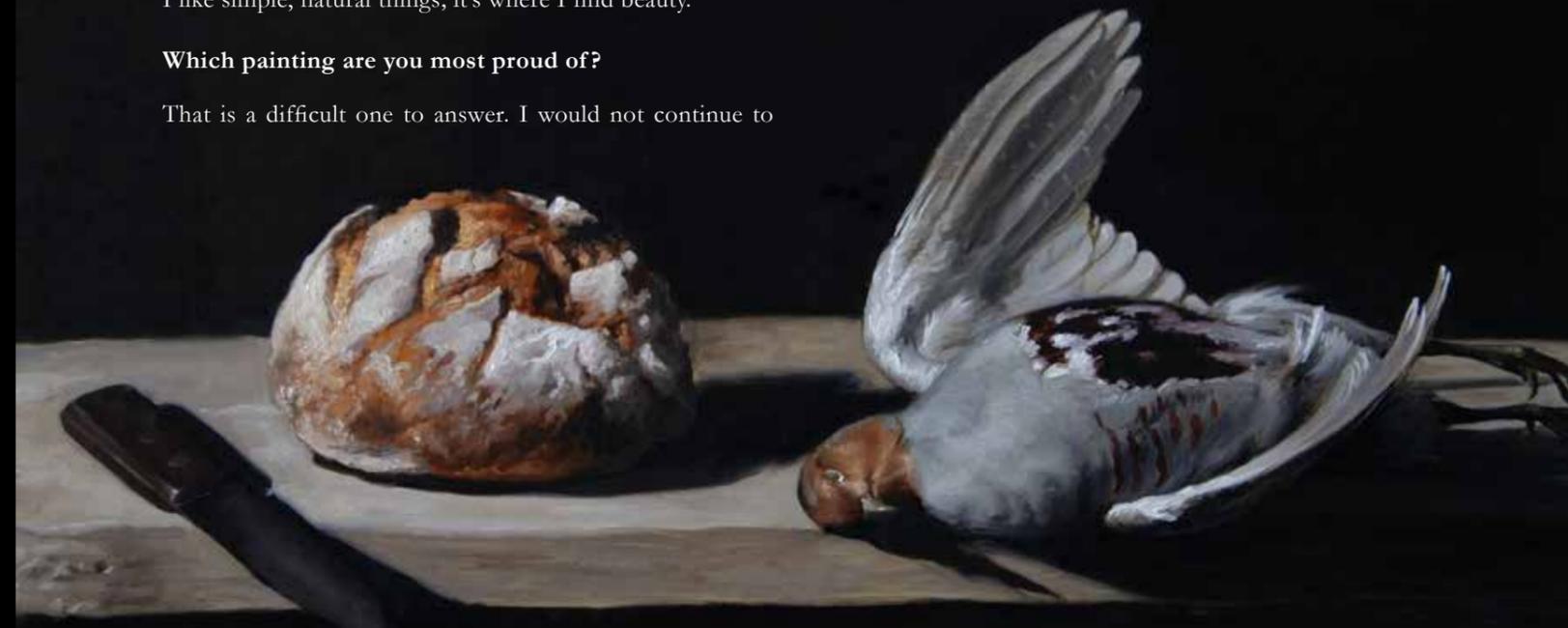
Everything I use is handmade which is my biggest USP on the technical side. This includes the gessoed panel, my varnishes, mediums and the seven oil paint colours I use. I use a late 17th century technique that ensures the finished painting will last forever if it is cared for properly. I work a painting up in two layers – an underpainting and a final layer. I use two types of brush – sable rounds and hog hair long filberts which are shaped like upturned hazelnuts.

### As an artist, what gives you most satisfaction?

Satisfaction comes from serving a client really well. Praise doesn’t rock my boat; completing a job well and delivering something beautiful does. I grew up with the motto *‘cui servire regnare est’* – he who serves, reigns.

### Who are your biggest collectors?

There are two. One is Sir David and Lady Kay Ord. They were one of my first-ever customers in 1995. He now has around 30 of my paintings. The second is Mr and Mrs Mike





and Barbara Williams. They are more than collectors; they have put an arm around me and have looked after me.

**What kind of commissions do you receive?**

A great range. Sport horses, church work, portraits. I have painted two 'icons' of the 1980s: Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II. Generally speaking, people know what I am capable of, so I hold the brushes and people tell me what to do. I am not proud!

**In your opinion which type of interior does your art look best in?**

Good question! Big, blousy paintings are designed for big, airy atriums and 'glass wall' spaces. I call them 'daytime paintings'. But my paintings are crepuscular and nocturnal:

the quiet jewels of the night. Illuminated, they come to life when you return from work.

**What is your release outside of painting?**

I sing in choirs or I go walking or cycling in the Wolds.

**Where can the public view your work?**

In Jonathan Cooper's gallery in Chelsea, plus I exhibit at the Chelsea Flower Show every year in May.

*[www.gillick-artist.com](http://www.gillick-artist.com)*