

Bright ideas

Once a dilapidated shell, painter Glen Scouller's Ayrshire farm is now a source of inspiration

BY BILL JAMIESON, PORTRAIT BY JANE BARLOW

IF PAINTINGS SET THE MOOD of a room, Sir Fred Goodwin, chief executive of the beleaguered Royal Bank of Scotland, has reason to be upbeat.

Amid a plunging bank share price and worries over sub-prime debt there hangs behind his desk a large bold painting of a Mediterranean village – sunny, vibrant, and full of energy and light. You could not be other than cheered up working under a canvas such as this.

The painting is by Glen Scouller, one of Scotland's most popular artists. If you

are looking for freshness of colour and canvases that reverberate with light and space, Scouller is your man. He is the antidote to the "Miserabilist School" of Scottish painting: stags at bay in dark, damp, brooding glens, studies in wretched brown and black depression which for some reason an older generation saw fit to hang on their walls. RBS has some 20 of his paintings across its property portfolio, with two in the chief executive's office.

Yet Scouller himself lives in one of the dampest valleys in Scotland under the brooding stare of an Ayrshire land-



Clockwise from main: Scouller in his studio; the living room; the Scoullers' collection of African art; tools of the trade

mark – Loudon Hill, at the head of the Irvine Valley.

Scouller and his wife Carol bought a rundown farmhouse ten years ago in the lee of Loudon Hall that was in such a state of dilapidation friends questioned their sanity. Parts of the roof had caved in, the outbuildings were in a sorry state and the woodwork in dire need of replacement.

But the farmhouse offered Scouller the space for a light-filled studio and an incomparable view of an iconic Scottish landmark that has haunted his work. Here is where Bruce fought the English (1307) and the Covenanters made a stand in 1679 at nearby Drumclog against "Bloody" Claverhouse.

More windows were added to allow light to flood in

Scouller has every reason not to be a painter, still less one so cheerful. He was born the son of a plumber in the working-class East End of Glasgow. It was his uncle, Adam Aitken, who bought Scouller a small box of Winsor & Newton oil colours at the age of nine. The smell of turps, linseed oil and paint has never left him.

He went to the Glasgow School of Art, winning prizes and a travelling scholarship to Crete. He spent 14 years as a reluctant teacher at Crawhill Secondary School but was inspired and encouraged by the head of the art department, Joe Crawford. Early influences were Matisse, Dufy and Marquet and his art school tutors David Donaldson, Alexander



Goudie and John Cunningham who tutored him at art school, and the "painter's painter" Joan Eardley, of whose work he is enormously fond.

If his paintings have a cheerful effect, it's not by conscious design. "If it ends up being cheerful it's just a happy consequence of the painting process. Unfortunately the viewer does not see the copious amounts of paint that ends up in the bin during the often agonising struggle to produce a painting."

His work has taken him to South Africa, India, Italy and France. He has also painted in Singapore and Sabah in Borneo and has recently worked in Zanzibar.

"When we moved to Ayrshire," he recalls, "it allowed me to get more involved with the landscape. I had done a lot of travelling, and still do. But this made me more conscious of the seasons. My main subject matter is light, whether on a landscape or a still life ... light and colour are two very strong elements in my work."

"We had outgrown our previous house and studio space in Newmilns. By chance our daughter Kim heard about the farm and although in a much neglected state we could see it had great potential."

The house nestles in a secluded gully, reached by a winding lane that runs off the A71. He was drawn to the area's "dramatic landscapes and skies with wonderful cloud formations, particularly in the autumn and winter when the colours are breathtaking".

An architect friend Robert Johnston set about transforming the interior of the house while retaining the exterior features, cleverly incorporating more windows to allow light to flood into the living and studio spaces. The overall effect is as dramatic as it is functional, with a gallery view of the studio and adjoining office where Carol works.



Oil lamps and an owl on a windowsill, top; *Oleander and Vines* Near Carces by Glen Scouller, above

"It's been an ongoing and rewarding project," says Scouller, "initially taking a year and a half before we could move in. And in the eight years or so since then we've been slowly reclaiming the wilderness outside."

The gardens are a delight, on every side of the farmhouse. He and Carol enjoy working in the garden and can at last gather the fruits (and vegetables) of their labours from the raised beds.

The house is home to a family of talents. Carol is a graphic designer who has been the mastermind behind her husband's catalogues. Daughter Kim won the Aspect Painting Prize, one of the top contemporary painting prizes in the UK and is now studying at The Prince's Trust Drawing School in London. Younger daughter Lara, fresh out of art school, was awarded the RDSA John Kinross Travelling Scholarship to Florence, and has recently won prizes at the Scottish Biannual Drawing Competition at the Paisley Institute and Museum. **SM**

■ An exhibition of Glen Scouller's recent paintings is at the Roger Billcliffe Gallery, Glasgow, until December 24. Tel: 0141-332 4027, www.billcliffegallery.com

