

For Sarah Stitt, 36, work is therapy. She miscarried in 1994 and coped with her bereavement by painting a series of pregnant women, some accompanied by angels. A year later she became pregnant. Just five days after the birth, she was back in her studio, hormonally insane and painting to prevent herself going mad.

She first "found salvation in art" at St Martins School of Art, aged 19. "I drank and drugged excessively," Stitt recalls. "My rebellious youth ended with a nervous breakdown, and painting was the only thing that helped me." In 1993, she suffered a second breakdown. "I was severely depressed, suicidal and confronting the demons of my past." So she paid with paintings for in-patient therapy at a clinic on the Greek island of Skiathos.

These days Stitt appears more cheerful, and her work has changed enormously. Gone are the narrative portraits – from the career-kickstarting commission of Earl Spencer to the more recent ones of *Mad Cow*s director Sara Sugarman, author Alice Thomas Ellis, painter Sarah Raphael and actor Dudley Sutton. Instead she focuses on urban landscapes, particularly ones which are atmospheric in their absence of people. "I grew bored of doing people. They're too self-conscious." The turning point came when she went to Manhattan for the first time and spent the entire trip with her face pointed upwards and her neck cricked, looking at buildings.

In her third solo show at Long & Ryle, Stitt exhibits images of the beaches and street life of southern California and Britain. Stitt doesn't think she fits into the contemporary arts scene. "I'm not a modern impressionist type or a Brit-pack installation artist. But I think painting will become popular again." Her oils sell for between £400 and £3,000 and she's collected by Ben Elton, novelist Frederick Raphael and *This Life* creator Amy Jenkins, who wrote Stitt's exhibition catalogue preface. Barclays, CitiBank and the Bank of America have also invested in her, which means she's becoming bankable. Soon she won't be living in a west-London council flat. □ **Caroline Phillips**
Sarah Stitt is showing until 30 June at Long & Ryle, 4 John Islip Street, London SW1 (020-7834 1434)



Out from the shadows

Painter Sarah Stitt has emerged from two breakdowns with a bold new style: starkly lit, unpeopled urban landscapes

▲ **'LA Ice-Cream Parlour'** (above right) Stitt spends her summers in Los Angeles staying in the "archetypal Hollywood pad" of Craig Ferguson, writer of the whimsical British comedy *Saving Grace*, and painting the local beaches and buildings. "I've grown fond of the unusual landscape of LA," Stitt says. "The domination of cars and absence of people, the wonderful mixture of shapes and vibrant colours and the billboards and street signs that you're bombarded with." As with many of her cityscapes, she took liberties with similitude in *LA Ice-Cream Parlour* – she altered colours and added and omitted details from what she saw. "I took out a car, put in a yellow taxi, changed the lettering on the adverts, and added more road to simplify the image." The painting also provides an insight into American culture. "In contrast to my London pictures, cars take the place of people."

▷ **'Beach House'** From Del Mar beach and LA's Grand Central Station to Chelsea Wharf and Battersea Power Station, Stitt explores British and American cultures through their architecture, signs and symbols. "In America you spend your time in the car reading adverts," she says. She paints surreal canvases lit by strong cinematic light, casting deep shadows and creating vivid colours framed by the sky. Her work is flat – "I'm not a painterly painter who uses blobs of paint," she says – and she is influenced by Edward Hopper, Sironi and Piero della Francesca. ■

