

Something for Everyone

From Sunprints to Sculptures

The first week of the Artweeks festival (6-14) focuses on South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse, and with thirty venues in a six-mile radius of Abingdon there's so much to see. In the very heart of town, for example, you'll find Abingdon Quilters in the County Hall with textile-based art from three local quilting groups, a popular annual exhibition by the Abbey Group in St Nicholas Church and two new Artweeks venues for 2023, The Charter Studios opened by Makespace (Oxford) and The Abbey Cinema which is hosting an enthusiastic group of artists, the Oxon Artmakers.



by Maisa Stolz

At St Ethelwold's House on East St Helen's Street, discover two art spaces that house an exhibition of Caroline Harben's landscapes, both local and from further afield, which encapsulate a spirit of place, and colourful and vibrant art by Artweeks newbie Emma Williams that is reminiscent of surface pattern and textile design. These semi-abstracted pieces are created in cool colours, embellished with sparkling metallic paints. The basis of some of Emma's mixed media paintings are cyanotypes, one of the first photographic processes of the nineteenth century, also known as 'sunprints'. Other images use natural pigments and materials such as real indigo, true sepia, foraged chalk and sea salt to create intriguing patterns and vivid contrast. You'll also be able to see sunprints inspired by watery environments including the Devon coast and local rivers and sketches and prints of local Abingdon scenes.



by Emma Williams

You can also explore the art of Chinese Brush Painting at 35 Ock Street through a collection of paintings by more than a dozen artists, expressing the essence of objects in simple, expressive, and even minimal strokes, and a range of fans, hand painted on stretched silk, with a real luminosity as the light shines through them. Enjoy delicate petals adorning a bough to the elegance of a crane; a cat's back arching in a single line and Oriental landscapes in which misty mountains tower above tiny villages far below.

"Although I always loved to draw," says Kerima Hill, one of the members of the group, "I trained in Shiatsu, a type of Japanese bodywork that is based on thousand-year-old Chinese medicine. The practice is underpinned by a solid structure of learning and yet is very intuitive. Chinese art too requires a careful base and disciplined practice after which intuition or the 'chi' [or soul] takes over. Then it's all about energy and flow, drawing on your inner essence. A good painting comes from the heart.

In Shiatsu, like in Chinese art, every detail matters and is considered to be connected; everything has meaning. As a clinical practitioner you are giving energy to the 'empty spaces' in another's body to reinvigorate them and in Chinese art the empty space on a piece of paper is every bit as important as the brush strokes. So when I discovered the art form of Chinese Brush Painting, I felt really at home, as it combined my two passions."

Chinese brushstrokes take very specific forms derived from ancient calligraphy. An artist will always take a piece of work by a Chinese Master as a starting point, following the original brushstrokes yet adding their own energy and flair to give a



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unique reinterpretation. That's an experience and expectation very different to that of contemporary western artists.

The artists use freshly ground black ink in various concentrations, in line and wash, or use vibrant Chinese watercolours, on hand made paper. "Chinese brush painting is, surprisingly colourful", so Kerima tells me, and because of specialised brushes that have their own miniature 'inkwells', a single stroke on the paper may consist of several colours that fade naturally into one another, or a single sweeping line may be edged with a second shade. Each picture is then finished with a red 'chop' or carved seal, and each artist has their own, like a signature. "My stamp says Dragon, as I'm a dragon astrologically" says Kerima, "which is lucky as the dragon is revered in China as the most auspicious of the Signs.

I focus on the details of natural forms, and plants in particular, often buds, flowers, petals and berries. Some people paint the big picture, not the details, but I'm inclined the other way. I've always been fascinated by the small scale and never tire of the minutiae. I love visiting the Ashmolean and seeing the breath-taking Chinese art there. I look at the individual strokes in each painting: 'The great Masters' brush work is so skilful that your eye follows their course, which creates a beautiful image, often with astonishing simplicity."

Brazilian sculptor Maisa Stolz, now resident in Abingdon, is also inspired by old masters, but this time Europeans over the last few centuries and her work, including A Goat with a Pearl Earring modelled on Vermeer's original, is on show in

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the UK for the first time at Peach Croft Barn for Oxfordshire Artweeks. Stolz's pieces are inspired by classic paintings and sculpture, the protagonists of which she portrays as an animal, matching both the shape and personality of the animal to the character she is representing. She then recreates the character in her garage studio in the heart of Abingdon, slowly building the shape from layer after layer of papier-maché and paint, before embellishing with fabric, glass, and other materials. The finished pieces are light-hearted, for the most part, and theatrical. "I hope they will make people smile," she laughs.

Degas' Little Dancer is perfect as a hare – her head tilted to the sky in a typical moon-gazing hare pose, her limb lean and lithe. If it weren't for her ears and her ballet shoes, which encase larger feet than you'd see on a human ballerina, her stance and poise are identical to the original.

"The Mona Lisa is a sheep because she seems calm and placid," explains Maisa, "and I decided that Van Gogh, in his self-portraits, was most like a duck!" she continues. "He's a thin-faced man with a golden orange beard and a rather pointed chin which reminded me of a beak, and character-wise ducks are curious and observant. I used Van Gogh's trademark style of bold and dramatic brushstrokes for his blue coat."

Maisa is exhibiting alongside twenty other artists in the stunning old barn at Peach Croft Farm in an exciting exhibition which includes contributions by 'The Six Great jewellers' and a series of small paintings of stylised Japanese ladies. Painted by Jenny Smith, these have increasingly complex hair and dramatic clothing and some incorporate Japanese fabric. "I was inspired by the recent Japan exhibition at the Ashmolean and the book *Memories of a Geisha*, and charmed by the elaborate hairstyles and dress," she explains.

Elsewhere in the county, Artweeks visitors can explore a five-acre sculpture park in the Cotswolds, take an art trail through the towns of Woodstock, Watlington or Wallingford, or tour America on a motorbike, go on safari in Tanzania, head to Svalbard or Cuba, and be enchanted by Rajasthan.

There's so much to see. Where will you go first?

by Jenny Smith

