



Through the keyhole

EXPLORING AN ARTIST'S HOME AND STUDIO

Esther Lafferty meets East Oxford's Emma Davis to hear more about her home, studio and art, as she prepares to welcome visitors for Oxfordshire Artweeks (4-11 May; venue 97)



Emma lives in an archetypal Victorian terrace in East Oxford, packed with original features. Not only that, there's art history on its very walls. "When we moved in we stripped the wallpaper and found paintings and murals on the plaster beneath – scenes of Oxford filled one bedroom, for example. I was fascinated to find out who had done them and so investigated the previous occupants. We discovered that a 'decorative house painter' called Mr Pimm was recorded at the address in 1901. And then, when we stripped some deteriorating wooden cladding off my two-storey building in the garden (which is also Victorian), we uncovered the most amazing stained glass windows beneath – a series of six which light up the space magically. It's incredible to think that they've been hidden for decades with no one knowing about them. We couldn't believe it – it felt like finding treasure.

"This isn't the sort of house which you'd expect to have stained glass in a garden outhouse," she smiles, "and so we think they



colours against a pale wall is like that of an indoor window-box. “Only the canvas never needs watering.”

Interestingly, the room below Emma’s studio which serves as her inspiration is a striking contrast. Its walls are packed with neat shelves of memorabilia from her childhood and characters she’s gathered since – from Playmobil characters to a four-foot ET, Buzz Lightyear and a Teletubby – and Emma also paints these as charming still lifes.

“I really love old dolls, the creepier and more kitsch the better. One of my favourite toy paintings is of a German ‘jelly doll’ that used to live at my grandparents’ house and now lives permanently in my studio. I loved painting her so much I bought three more ‘sisters’ for her from eBay which are also proudly on display next to my Smurfs and ET!

“I was a shy but cheeky child, an only child, and so absolutely loved my toys and would lose myself in the imaginary worlds I created with them. I could become absorbed in games with them, and painting is like that for me today. A paintbrush makes me bold and courageous.”

were probably made by this Mr Pimm too – we assume he probably worked on college buildings but we don’t know. We’d love to find out more about his work if there’s anyone with an interest in local history who can shed any light.”

Emma now uses the upper storey of this building as her studio, painting alongside these extraordinary windows which cast colours into the room, adding to the airy atmosphere of her working space and her bright choices of palette. Each of her colourful abstracts catch your eye and hold your gaze. They’re striking, bold and punchy statement pieces rich with cheer. Both spring-like and joyful, it is as if Emma has pinned to canvas that feeling you have when you can’t help but burst into song on a sunny summer’s day, or the wonderful limitless horizons of childhood when the world is bright and full of adventure.

“I find the best paintings come from playing with and exploring colour. Putting unexpected colours against each other so there’s a contrast, a discordance even, can have spectacular results because they can bring each other to life.”

Her abstracts are designed to own the space in which they hang, and are perfect for bringing a crisp plain wall to life in a modern environment or adding an element of surprise to an older home. They are the absolute antithesis of clutter, bringing with them a flavour of clean-lined Danish design, smart 60s styling or the bright strong organic geometry of flowers. “Gerberas and tulips are my favourites,” says Emma, who particularly loves combining the deep reds, oranges and pinks that you’d see in a summer garden, and although this is an unusual combination for a painter, the impression of these



Visit artweeks.org to see the other places you can visit from 4-27 May during Artweeks, as hundreds of artists open their studios to the public or host pop-up exhibitions in interesting spaces, giving you the chance to pick up something unique to add a touch of style to your home.