

ISOLATION ART:

Inside & Out



The last 12 months have been quite a year for Oxfordshire's visual arts community. Here **Esther Lafferty**, festival director of Oxfordshire Artweeks, talk to two artists whose art reflects the response of many of us to lockdown and isolation.



In East Oxford, Emma Davis has been creating a series of quirky pictures that are a great record of the unusual times we are living through, and how so many of us are getting through the days.

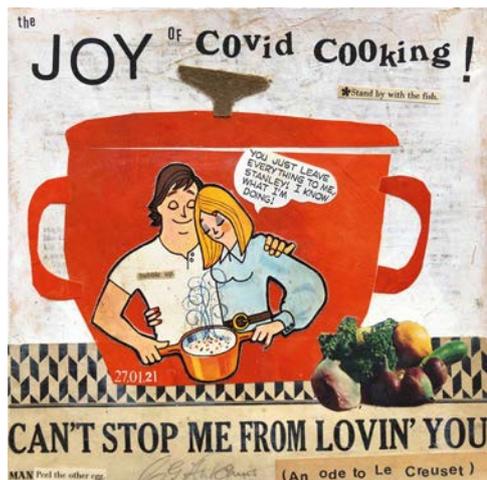
"I'm enjoying making these new year collages," says Emma. "They give me a creative focus and a reason to go to my studio every day. My first collage of 2021 was The Vaccines. In those first few days of 2021 there was already so much news to take in and digest. It was a week of bad news in the form of lockdown 3 and good news in the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine rollout. Oh, and the joy of the daily briefings back again!"

Another of Emma's collages focuses on the phenomenon of COVID-cooking for those cooped up indoors with time on their hands. "The best thing I ever found at a car boot sale was my oval orange Le Creuset pan," she grins. "It cost me £6, it sits on the hob and I use it every day. It's a bit tarnished, a bit stained,

but it's my favourite pan in the kitchen. This collage was influenced by my pan and the book *Cooking Together* that I picked up for £1 in December. It's full of 1970s cheesy stuff and it encourages couples to cook together. In it they say, 'We think that people who make love together should want to do as much together as possible.' Well, no! I'm the boss of the kitchen! My husband cooks on Sunday but can keep well out of my way for the rest of the week because he's so messy! Either way, it's just so poignant now: we can't escape each other as we're all at home for what seems like forever!

"I have lived by some lightly alternative government lockdown 3 rules: stay home, love your plants, drink wine. I'm into all three of those. The staying home bit involves being in my studio, broken up with visits back to the house to make yet more meals. The plants thing: I can hardly wait to sow all my saved chilli seeds from last year. And the wine bit is my little treat while I'm cooking, I enjoy a small glass before dinner and remember the olden days when friends and wine were allowed to mingle!"

Another is a reminder to keep in touch with the people dear to us that we can't see at the moment. "Sometimes I get so engrossed in my own life/studio/family that I forget to pick up the phone but it's so important. I was inspired to make another of my pictures firstly by the lovely chair and then I found that lady who





slotted in just perfectly! All the quotes come from a book with no cover (I've used it up!) and I couldn't resist the tiny apples!"

Elsewhere, Emma reflects on the new words we're all using on a daily basis to which a year ago we would have had exactly the same reaction as the bemused jolly lady on the bottle in the picture. "It's funny how these have become our new normal so quickly," she laughs, "but I am looking forward to getting back to (a new) normal!"

It is the great outdoors that has inspired contemporary abstract artist Ella Clocksin over the last 12 months. "Since last year's heartbreakingly beautiful spring, when the world stopped and the pandemic first took root, my daily walk to Shotover Hill has been a lifeline," says Ella, who in her Headington studio and the local environs, creates expressive paintings, each a 'visual haiku' that captures the world around her.

"As for so many of us who have faced adaptations to life, it's been a stressful year for me," she continues, "but completely hidden away in the woods, well off the beaten track, with only the birds for company, I've been drawing and painting in response to the sounds as well as what I'm seeing. The capacity to get totally absorbed in both deliberate and subliminal decisions in painting can be a way of stilling my mind from the stress of the current situation. And this approach has much in common with mindfulness practices."

"The artist Maggi Hambling [a painter and sculptor best known for her four-metre-high steel scallop on Aldeburgh beach in Suffolk] said once that if we can make friends with our work – the practice of painting – it becomes something we can be with, even when we're not feeling up to much. I've been putting this to ▶

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the test as never before as I paint the experience of lockdown and aspects of it that can't be seen or easily put into words. This means noticing, moment by moment, what is in my field of vision, and hearing at that moment, and responding on the paper. It's rather like when we dance: we hear the music and respond and move. I've long worked from observation to abstraction, so I'm used to processing what I see into something more emotional. But my recent work relies on making marks in watercolour, pencil and gouache which transcribe the rhythm and musical undulation of birds singing in the woods.

"The results include the woods – trees,

branches, or tangled undergrowth – but also notations or marks that represent the pattern of the birds' call and response across the woods. The calls of alarm. The falling cry of a red kite. A clear, sharp staccato. The two-note chiffchaff. And the baroque ornamentation of a blackbird in full song."

Ella's recent work, her *Daphne / Retellings* series, is underpinned by the Greek myth of Daphne, who turned into a tree to shield herself from assault. Ovid's telling suggests she is still sentient, within the bark and branches. These paintings imagine the reversal of Daphne's metamorphosis, so that she, or the trees, could speak.

Main Image:
Daphne / Retellings

Top Right:
Winterfall

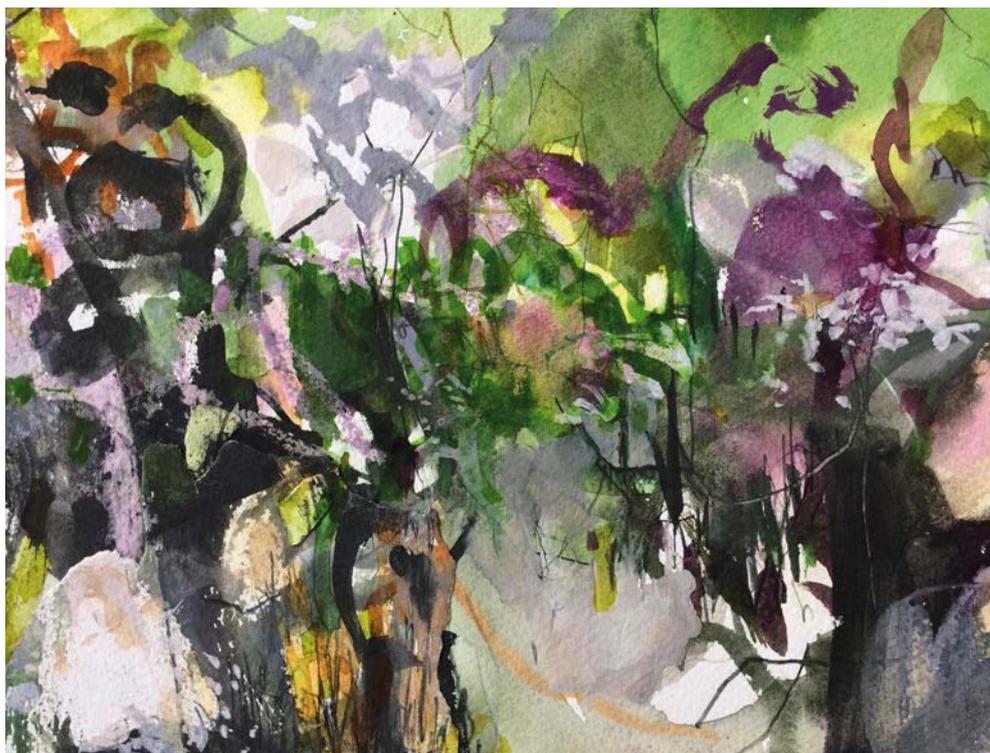
Bottom Right:
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“Whether it’s the trees, the birdsong, or the poetic atmosphere of ancient woodland, I have found that noticing that which is striking or beautiful gives moments of respite from the sometimes overwhelming stresses of the current time,” smiles Ella. “Art can’t change the world. But it can help us to navigate life’s deeper waters.”



Both Ella and Emma will be opening their studios during the Oxfordshire Artweeks festival which runs 1-23 May with venues to visit (regulations allowing) and virtual art trails to explore. artweeks.org