



ALIVE ON CANVAS:

Motoko Aritake-Wild



Motoko Aritake-Wild – a new artist bursting onto the Oxfordshire art scene this spring – is looking forward to opening a new Oxfordshire gallery, The Forge Gallery in Ascott-under-Wychwood. It's a far cry from her previous career, working on projects in places all around the world to increase their living standards so Esther Lafferty caught up with her to find out more about her life and her art.

Motoko, your work is bright, bold and cheerful. How would you describe your artistic style?

My art is about people, emotions, colours, happy memories, music, movies and personal stories. Whether I am painting a pop art of celebrity, children's or family portrait, still life or landscape, I imagine the emotions the finished picture will evoke in the viewers: I'm hoping to inspire happiness, peace of mind or those great memories you have when you watch an old film or listen to your favourite song. One of my greatest joys when creating art is seeing the happiness it brings to other people, reminding them of good times and people they treasure. When I was in New York I painted a few commissions of children and families which, when the parents of a child or children first saw them, they burst into tears...joyful ones...and that was the best experience for me as an artist.

It was the owner of the gallery in New York where I was exhibiting who pushed me to be more courageous with colours, so I started painting famous personalities who evoked fond memories for me in music and movies. I started with the 60s icon Audrey Hepburn, then Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman from Casablanca, Lisa Minelli from Cabaret, Sophia





Lauren... as well as music icons like David Bowie, Tina Turner, Diana Ross... all with lots of vivid colours. They were particularly popular among owners of cafes and restaurants as well as private clients in New York and Greenwich.

I am also fascinated about people and faces. Everyone has a story... famous or not, and I feel like I am sharing that piece of life story with the model when she or he becomes 'alive' on in my canvas.

When do you start creating art?

I did not have a typical artistic trajectory and I only started painting seriously later in life. However, I grew up in Tokyo, Japan and I have been drawing girly faces with big eyes (typical Japanese manga style!) for as long as I can remember: I had loved art classes and my teacher did suggest I go to an art school after graduating from high school. I was very tempted but at the same time, I felt that I should venture further out into the world and seek adventure. It was Bob Geldof's Live Aid concert where I suddenly found direction: those terrible pictures of the emaciated starving children in Africa and the musicians coming together to help via the UN really moved me and I wanted to be part of that effort. I

was no musician so I had to join the UN – I learnt English, French and Spanish went on to work for them for them for thirty years – first in the Indian Ocean, then Madagascar and Switzerland - during which time I was involved in programmes in Africa, and elsewhere too, helping local orphans, victims of domestic violence and then working to eradicate child labour. As part of this project we used art and music to help former child labourers recover from traumatic experiences and rehabilitate back to the society: the resultant art exhibition went around the world. Art needs no language nor translations. One seven-year-old boy, for example, painted first a picture of himself in black and white chained up in a mine, digging holes, paint and then another of himself playing football in sunshine in beautiful colours. It was so clear to me that art can heal and bring joy not only to the creator but also others and can be used to promote kindness, compassion and solidarity.

I began painting again, simply for myself and was soon asked to do commissions and then to participate first in a local gallery show in a small town in Connecticut and then in big galleries in New York and Miami. It just went crazy! I was even accepted as a visiting artist in the ►





Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to copy the painting by Antonio Mancini, my favourite Italian Grandmaster, in front of hundreds of tourists visiting MET everyday... which was a frightening but exhilarating experience.

Oxfordshire is a long way from New York. How did you up in the Wychwoods?

The rest of my family are English so, it made sense that as we called time on globe-trotting to settle somewhere for the long term, it was the UK and Oxfordshire is very international and beautiful. We are delighted to be living in Ascott-under-Wychwood now.

However, my heart is always with the humanitarian assistance work, so I am currently doing a pro bono work for Oxfam Global Humanitarian Team and I will be donating 10% of the proceeds to Action for Children while preparing for the opening of my art gallery at the heart of the village. When we arrived in the village two years ago, it was a hard adjustment, particularly with the pandemic and also surviving a terrible car accident. The people in the village were so kind and friendly to us and thanks to them and our new friends, we now feel very much at home in Ascott.

I am hoping that my art gallery will give something back to the community as well as contributing to the charities dear to my heart. It will be a place for local artists to showcase their art, for local people to meet and perhaps

choose something special for someone special, and eventually I am hoping to provide opportunities in the space for children who are less privileged to enjoy a transformative art experience.

Motoko's new gallery is opening for Oxfordshire Artweeks in May (Artweeks venue 406) and she looks forward to welcoming you to see her own art, delicate drawings by botanical artist Junko Sakai and wrought iron sculpture by Christopher Townsend.

