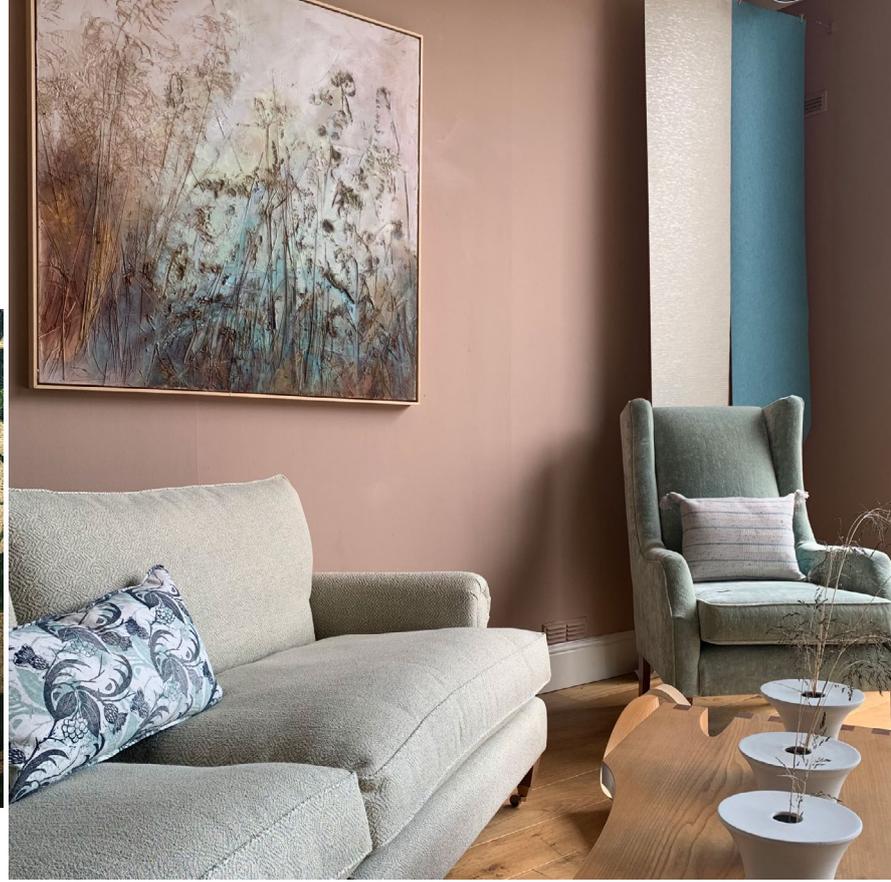


THE ART OF INTERIORS

ESTHER LAFFERTY MEETS: LAURA MIDDLETON



In addition to her role as Festival Director for Oxfordshire Artweeks, Esther Lafferty is a writer and reviewer for our sister title, OX. In each issue she interviews an artist from the region and shares with readers their work and insights into their creative process. For this edition of OX Homes, Esther went to meet Laura Middleton who, with her partner Alex, creates wonderful work in homes up and down the country. Her home in Eynsham is where she has her own art practice.



A graphic designer by training who specialised in illustration, Laura is now a painter and specialist decorator working alongside partner Alex Smith, a trained interior designer who specialises in traditional finishes.

“In my 20s and 30s I travelled lots to work for all sort of interesting in people in interesting places. For example, I did marbling work in a flat where they also wanted crocodile skin-effect skirting boards! I worked on the King’s bedroom in a palace in Jordan, adding an aged wood finish. Now I love being based in Oxfordshire, and having a more local focus, or UK-focus certainly.

I enjoy the big interior design projects, although they can be a month long or more because you can really get stuck into them. They take much more organising and often you need a mathematical eye to see how patterns and stencils will need to be laid out. Fortunately, Alex is very good at that side of things. Then it’s a pleasure to interpret what the client wants from and for the space, and to weave their thoughts and colour preferences in with my own ideas to translate the plan into the finished piece.

I love doing murals because you can just pack them with nature – or other things – and a favourite of mine was a mural I did in a rather smart Northern hotel which was a view of the valley in which the building stood in the style of the 1930s railway posters. The mural included both the building and a tiny Bentley, the owner’s prize and joy!

In the past we’ve painted designs directly onto walls, but during the pandemic we’ve had more of a focus on hand-painted and hand-stencilled wallpaper, and this is often inspired by 18th



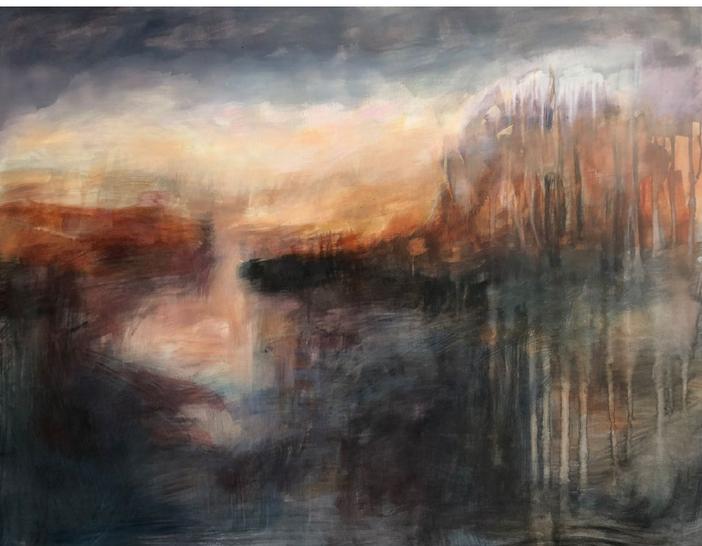
century Chinoiserie. It’s wonderfully varied, and I have also done a number of commissions of almost life-size animals in charcoal; prize bulls and longhorns, for example.

In my own art, though, at the moment I am really inspired by the Thames. I live in Eynsham and spend a lot of time walking by the river. A connection with nature is a big thing for me, it’s when I’m at my happiest, and I am currently painting a series of small views of the Thames.

Then in May I am showing a few of these alongside a very different type of work at Derwent House, on Bridge Street in Witney. Derwent House is an exciting new Artweeks venue this year: it’s a brilliant new space for craft and interior design in the very heart of the town where the handmade sofa showroom Wesley-Barrell used to be. Now it’s full of gorgeous furniture, printed and



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woven textiles and ceramics by amazing designers and I'm planning to show more interiors-based pieces wallpapers, panels and big statement pieces made from textured plaster and gold. These are icons, almost – a celebration of nature's riches which is part painting and part sculptural décor that has been physically created from actual plants.

During the Artweeks festival, I'm also opening my studio in Wilcote where people can come and visit me. It's where Alex and I work, and we have a big airy studio which is part of a wonderful hidden-away group of artist studios, set around a communal gallery space in the middle of the woods between Woodstock, Witney and Chipping Norton. It's a uniquely special place; a haven or an enchanted glade, with a supportive and encouraging community of artists who all have very different approaches to art and yet have similar fundamental values. Because artists work alone a lot of the time, it can be quite isolating, so Wilcote and the ethos there is tremendously important to me. It's an amazing place to visit if you're interested in how artists' minds work, their processes and influences, as well as the finished piece.

At Wilcote I will be working on and exhibiting a new series of paintings called Journeys Home - the first set of which will be at Darl-e and the Bear in Woodstock, and Battersea Affordable Art Fair this spring. They are developed partly from the



Thames miniatures and – largely – from that idea of travelling home. The idea came from being in the car, returning home at twilight; that gloaming time of the day when the lights shimmer and the moon shines through the trees. I wanted to capture that sense of coming back to somewhere that's a comfort and also the idea of coming back to your true self, too; to that sense of trust in yourself that you have as a small child, and that absolution of adult responsibility. I remember being in the back of the car with my parents, looking out of the window as we travelled home and all I had to do was simply sit and exist. As an adult you are never that free again until you discover that actually you can give yourself licence to feel like that, and that's the feeling I hope this series evokes. I've chosen an earthy natural palette and the paintings are almost blurry as if you're looking out of the window, speeding past (or a bit myopic) and the view could be any time, anywhere. They're general, fairly timeless, and in them, unlike creating something for a particular purpose or person, I can really invest my own feelings and personality which is a release, and again a feeling of coming home."

For more information on Oxfordshire Artweeks and the hundreds of artists and venues taking part visit artweeks.org.

Laura is showing at venues 355 (Wilcote Art) and 365 (Derwent House).

