





Meet the Artist: Merrill Jacobs

This month and next, Oxfordshire Artweeks artists present a Christmas season of intimate open studios and festive events – great opportunities to buy local and to find inventive and imaginative gifts for under the Christmas tree. Browse the online art trail for inspiration, and here you’ll find Merrill Jacobs, an Abingdon photographer and chair of Abingdon Camera Club who is best known for his images of landscapes, sunrises and sunsets.

Merrill enjoys capturing big vistas and big flowing skies and it’s the misty mornings and moody atmosphere of the autumn and winter months that most inspire him, as Esther Lafferty discovered when she spoke with him. “It’s the changing of the weather, the moving clouds, the threat of rain, and the way the light falls. The shadows and silhouettes add intrigue and depth”, he explains. “Although occasionally I’ve been lucky enough to take some shots where I’ve just bowled up – especially when I was walking my dog – sometimes I’ll be somewhere for three or four hours finding exactly the right spot and waiting for the right moment.”

Whereas painters can create their own composition, a photographer must work with what’s in front of them, and this can be a real challenge.

“Simply taking two or three steps to the side can change the composition radically, so deciding where to position yourself and at what height, is important. And in the foreground: what do you include? If there are branches, do you have them above the line of a hill, for example, or creeping across it? I’m particularly keen on leading lines like railings or a path leading into the distance to draw the viewer in.”

Abingdon is, Merrill continues, “a phenomenal town for photography with its old county hall, other historic buildings, the Thames with its beautiful bridge and weir, and the town’s many quirky traditions like the Ock Street Mayor, hot cross bun throwing, and the Runaway fair.” ▶



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Oxford takes on a darker dynamic persona in Merrill’s digital artwork



Oxford, however, takes on a darker dynamic persona in Merrill’s digital artwork. He reimagines the city’s iconic landmarks amidst extraordinary and unexpected weather conditions. Challenging our perception of the city as a place of timeless serenity by introducing scenes of tempestuous change, Merrill presents us with familiar buildings shown under the force of nature’s extremes: a tsunami engulfs the Radcliffe Camera, the Sheldonian Theatre is overcome by desert, and nature begins to reclaim The Bridge of Sighs. By presenting these scenes in unexpected ways, the series invites viewers to see the familiar through a new lens – one that is ever-changing, unpredictable, and filled with wonder.

And introducing an element of fun to his work, Merrill is also a pet photographer with a difference. His ‘PetFlicks’ are film-style posters in which his late dog Betty takes the starring role. “Although I began to create PetFlicks about a year ago, specifically for the Artweeks festival last May,” says Merrill, “the idea grew out of a decade of calendars of Betty which I made for all the family every Christmas: pictures of the dog in the garden, in the sea and so on. After a couple of years they felt too similar, so I began to adapt the photos into the covers of a newspaper, The Daily Growl, with funny captions and headlines. I then moved on to film posters, recreating Jaws as Paws. The original poster showed a shark’s nose rising through the water, beneath a woman swimming. I used Betty’s nose instead and replaced the swimmer with a cat.”

It was after this that Merrill began to create PetFlicks, a collection of layered digital composites with careful attention to detail,

cinematic styling, and a splash of humour. Each of these playful movie posters is a humorous celebration of film genres with a four-legged twist and, with a dog as the star of the silver screen, of canine companionship.

Born to be Wild, for example, shows Betty on a motorbike in the desert, being followed by a police car, explosions, two Apache helicopters with incoming missiles – and she’s smiling. “Actually, she’s panting, it looks like a smile,” grins Merrill.

“I’m inviting viewers to see pets not just as companions, but as larger-than-life heroes, villains, and stars, proving once and for all that every dog is born to lead the pack; on and off the screen,” Merrill adds. “They’re designed to be stand-alone images as they are, but it could also be your dog (or cat or guinea pig) as the star of Space Bandits or Tom Cruise in Mission Impawsible this Christmas.”

So, what’s next? “I’m now planning Murder on the Pawrient Express, inspired by the original 1970s version in golds and greens. Betty will be the sleuth, Hercule Poirot, and all the characters will be dogs. Sean Connery played an army officer, and I think a bulldog would suit his personality. And where you’d expect there to be the outline of a corpse, there’ll be the outline of a cat.”



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You can see more of Merrill's photography and PetFlicks at merrilljacobs.co.uk and visit artweeks.org to see art, craft and event information from Oxfordshire's creatives.