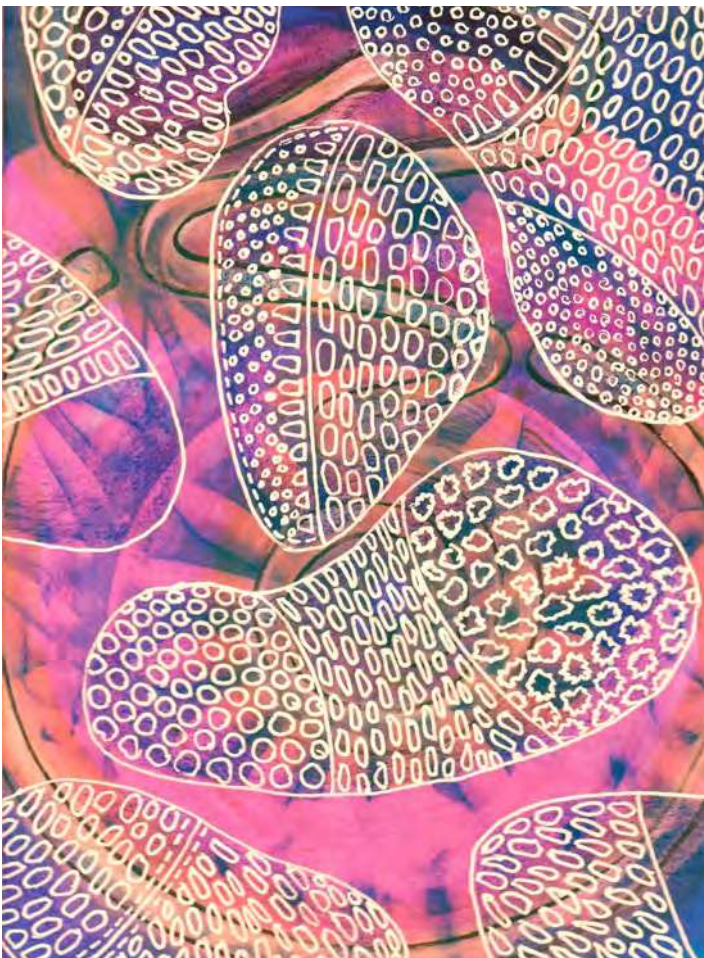




MEET THE ARTIST:

Emma Williams

Inspired by science, history and two bearded fishermen look-alikes, Abingdon artist Emma Williams is the winner of the 2026 Artweeks Mary Moser Award, an annual award intended to help develop the career of an artist who has taken up art professionally after time working in another sector. Artweeks festival director, **Esther Lafferty** chatted to Emma to find out more about her path into art.



Jewels of the sea

“**W**hen I was a young teenager in Cornwall, I absolutely hated art at school,” she laughs, “then I changed secondary school to a place where there were the most amazing art teachers, Pete and Martin. They had long fisherman’s beards, and they wore fisherman’s jumpers and clogs all year round.

They had a real can-do attitude and gave spontaneous lessons like, ‘Hey, do you fancy doing some raku firing today?’ Then we would all pile out of the workshop to make a kiln in a day. And then they’d say, ‘right, go make some pots,’ and we would.

Pete and Martin also used to organise trips for us in their two long-wheelbase Land Rovers. We might drive down to see Bernard Leach’s pottery or out onto the moors to sketch. Whatever your interest, they really encouraged you. Art became an adventure.”

After a fine art degree, Emma worked in the slide department of the Oxford University Department of History of Art and, because she loved community education and engaging with people, she also volunteered at the Ashmolean Museum. From there, she found her way into the Botanic Garden where she ran events and family-friendly sessions focusing on plant biology and biodiversity.

“In the 20 years that I was working at the university, I barely had time to pick up a pencil

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to be creative for myself. Then I realised, I was trying to shoehorn art into every session I taught – it’s a great way to explain and understand the science but for me, it was time for a change.”

Emma’s love for science is clear in her art, in which she brings together varying strands of interest, composing her artworks from a variety of layers and elements with an eye for colour, surface pattern and design.

“Artists are like magpies, collecting shiny bits of information, and visual clues to hoard for reuse later,” she smiles. “I delve into and harvest parts of scientific diagrams or patterns from the natural world. I’m also interested in history now, although I wasn’t at school. I think it’s amazing that you can do an about turn in your life and a midlife reawakening. It’s not a crisis, it’s a reinvention.”

Emma remembered that as a teenager, she’d been to the Fox Talbot Museum in Lacock, Wiltshire. Fox Talbot was a scientist and a photography pioneer who invented a chemical process that was a precursor to modern photography and so Emma ordered some chemicals and began creating cyanotypes – or ‘sunprints’.

These cyanotypes are the starting point for most of her art.

“Cyanotypes are blue and white which I often embellish with gold,” she continues. “The colours look amazing together,” she adds, “and if blue and gold was good enough for Tutankhamun, it’s good enough for me.” ▶

Cartesian Labyrinth

“The work during my first Artweeks exhibition was heavily influenced by the sea – I collected buckets of seaweed to bring back to Oxfordshire to draw and to paint, much to the horror of my family. I also use arable plants like wheat stems from the local countryside to create shapes.

I like processes that relinquish control to the elements, using the science of the sun and salt, adding salt to inks and colours to get pattern and texture. Every artwork starts off like a tiny chemistry lab,” she tells me.

“I’m also fascinated by hill forts, old tracks and ancient patterns on the landscape – there are so many remnants of Iron Age settlements along the Oxfordshire Ridgeway. That ancient human history is so appealing to me because so much about that time is still unknown. We’re always making guesses and predictions from ancient patterns on rocks and stones about the people who walked these pathways hundreds and hundreds of years ago. I enjoy the eras where there’s still an unknown, so there’s space to make your own reading of the past.”

Emma’s love of pathways extends to labyrinths, and she was delighted to discover the Abingdon Labyrinth in the back of an old manuscript originally written in Abingdon. “I love real life labyrinths,” she continues. “They’re a mark on the landscape that was made intentionally and yet it isn’t useful like a building or a well. They always come with a story and there’s an element of mystery to why they’re there or what’s hidden in the middle.”

Emma reflects the idea of the unknown ideas in her art, leaving ‘space’ for people to add their own interpretations. “Our brains are programmed to recognise faces and animals, so we see them in clouds formations, for example,” she explains.

Some of Emma’s cyanotypes look cellular, “like a pollen grain through an electron scanning microscope”, yet they were created with pieces of antique glass. The different patterns and varying thickness of Emma’s granny’s trifle bowl create ray bursts of light on sun-print paper that look like cuts and ridges and the shadows.

The changing strength of the natural light throughout the day and the seasons also affects the characteristics of the cyanotype, and so that she will be less dependent upon the vagaries of the weather, Emma plans to use the prize money from this award to buy a UV lamp for her artist desk.

In addition to her own work, Emma also now teaches art to both children and adults.

“When I look back, I never wanted to be an artist in an ivory tower or a big white studio,” she adds. “I always wanted to be somebody who could connect with people, to roll up my sleeves and inspire them too as my Cornish teachers did for me.”



AncientTracks 2024



For more on Emma visit
naturalllearningoxford.co.uk