



MEET THE ARTIST:

Anita Joice

Anita Joice's collection of expressive paintings, *Portals of Gnosis*, takes viewers on a journey through familiar landscapes where they intersect with the realms of spirit, symbol, ancient memory and imagination. **Esther Lafferty** meets her and discovers that each of her colourful dreamlike visions of well-known Oxfordshire locations includes a camouflaged character or hidden element to discover from the subtle face of a tree spirit to a phoenix or cockatrice.



Gnosis is a Greek word for knowledge, and knowledge of spiritual mysteries, particularly from direct, experiential or intuitive knowing. *Portals of Gnosis* refers to familiar places where Anita has found extraordinary moments of perception or inner knowing which weave together her interests in history and place, archaeology, mythology and mystery.

Anita began working on this series of work last autumn, her plein-air painting practice inspired by the British painter Kurt Jackson, whose large canvases are concerned with natural history, ecology, the landscape and environmental issues. Painting outside whatever the weather, Jackson unfolds giant raw canvases on site and incorporates the names of animals and creatures that he hears or sees. Anita, too, paints directly onto a large canvas on the ground.

"I began by picking seven meaningful spots, familiar locations I wanted to share and reflect upon with other people. Before sharing a place with the people who see my paintings, I want to share the painting experience itself, so I invited other artists to sketch and paint alongside me – 'plein-air', in all weathers."

Anita then returns to each spot several times until the work is nearly complete, after which, once the canvas is stretched taut, she paints the fine details and adds small secret creatures.

"Mostly I look then to see what is emerging in the marks themselves rather than imposing my thoughts. It's as if the painting shows me who is hiding there – perhaps created by my unconscious movements."



In her Oxford work, depicting the Bridge of Sighs for example, there is a secret sphinx in a window overlooking the iconic view.

"This painting has been about 25 years in the making," Anita smiles. "It began with a dream I had when I first moved to Oxford during which I visited an archaeological site at this spot. There was a mini amphitheatre surrounded by ferns with trickling water. The dream was incredibly vivid, and it felt like a sacred place, but no one knew of an ancient amphitheatre by the Bodleian and so I forgot about it. Then, more recently, I was studying the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Britain and I had the exact same dream. Once again, it felt so real. This time I described it to my archaeology teacher, and she identified the structure in my thoughts as a 'nymphaeum'; a temple to honour the water spirit.

That immediately felt right. Although it seems like an imagined narrative in the painting, I feel certain that it does exist deep under Oxford's streets, and one day it'll be found, as Richard III was found in a car park," she laughs.

"And so, in Portals of Gnosis, I have also included a water feature from Rousham Gardens, that evokes the sense of a nymphaeum. It's below the Octagon Pond, which is also a subject of one of paintings. The gardens were created in the 18th century, designed by William Kent, at a time when visiting Europe's classical sites was a popular activity for a certain sector of British Society. The gardens themselves are like a miniature Grand Tour, with statues of classical figures dotted around."

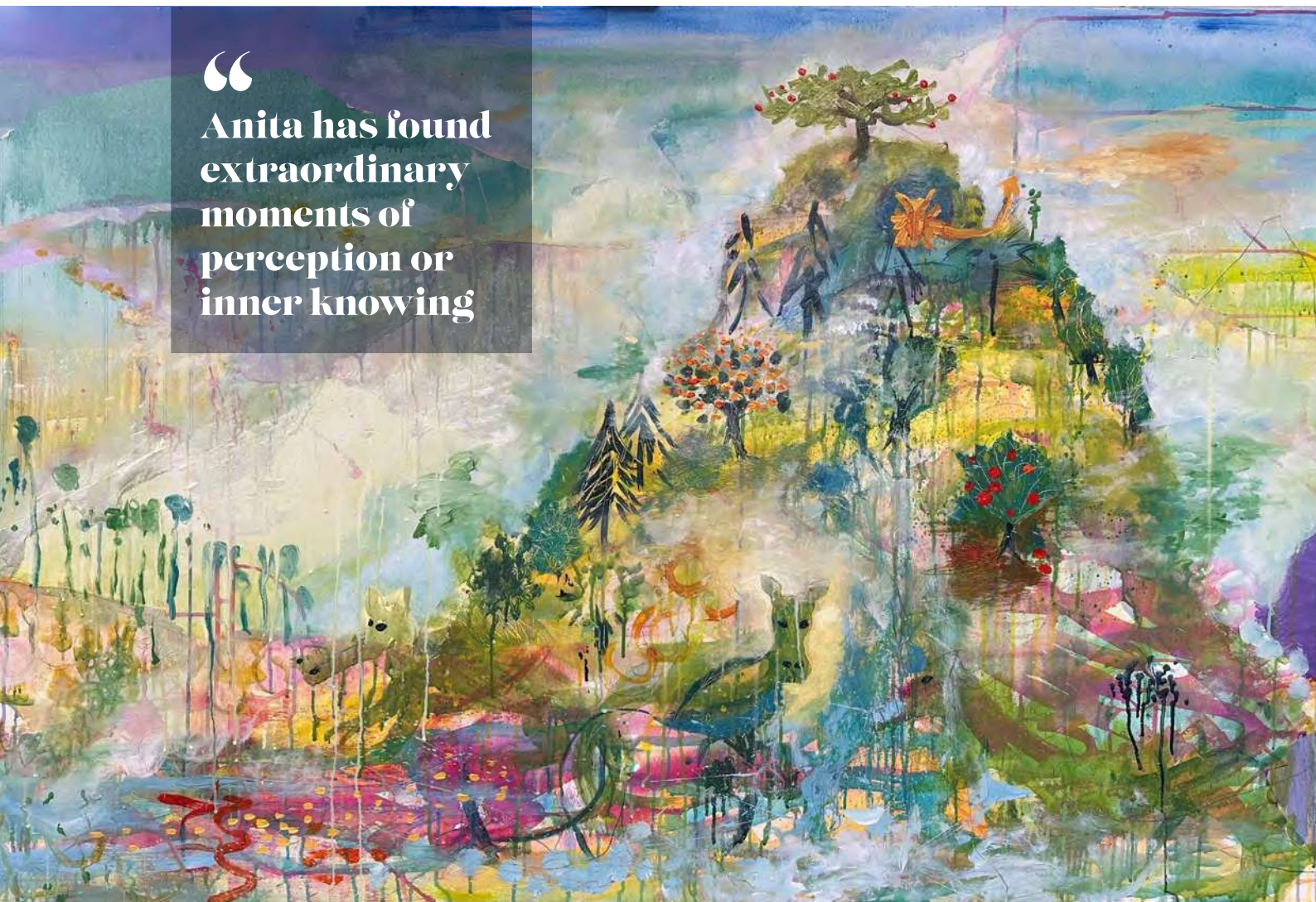
Three more of the Portals of Gnosis collection were painted in the grounds of Blenheim Palace, each drawing on a different period of history.

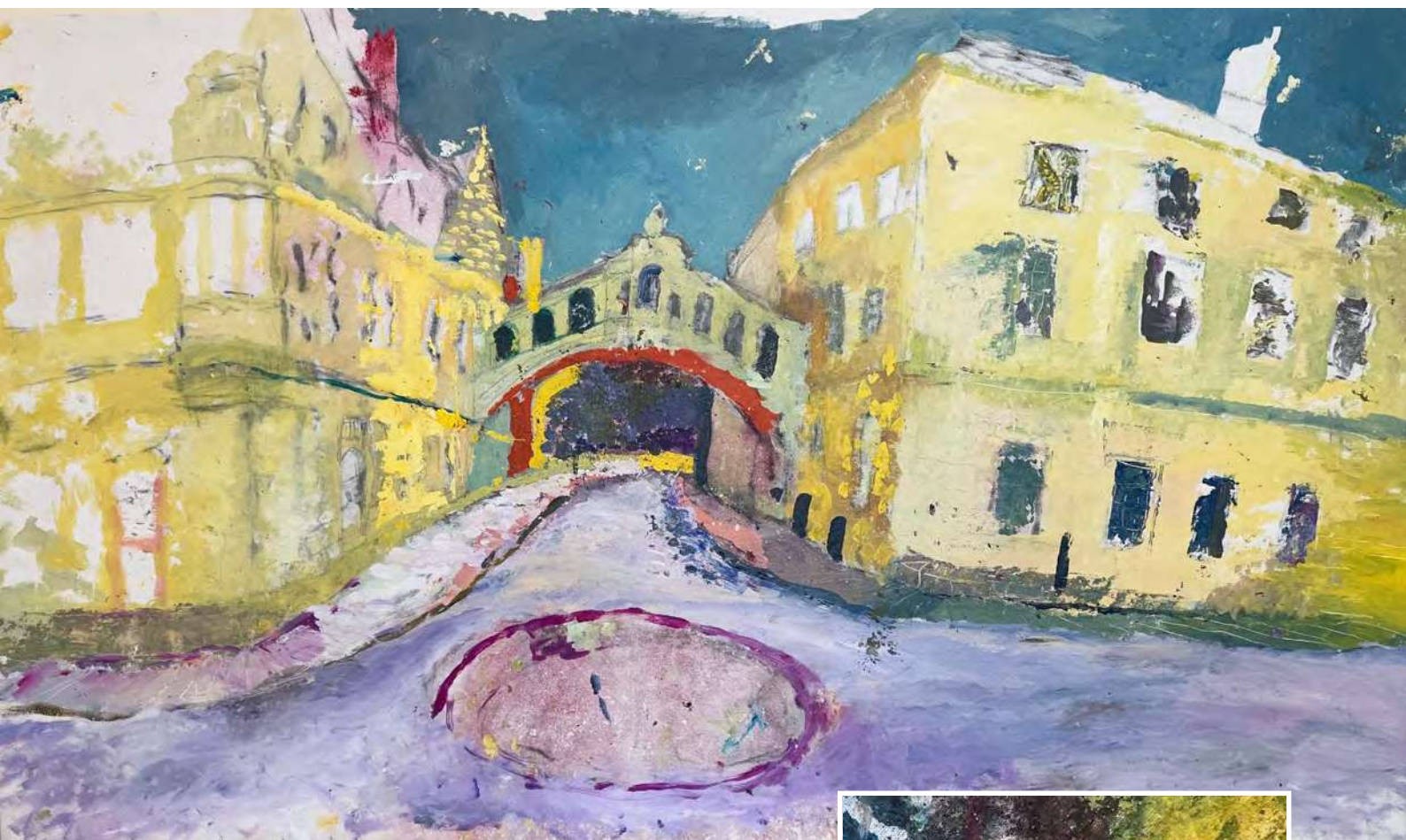
The first shows woodland at Blenheim, where in the 12th century the land was a royal hunting Forest, and a royal hunting park was enclosed by Henry I with a lodge and a menagerie of animals, said to include lynx, leopards and lions. This was developed further into Woodstock Palace by Henry II.

"It's such a fascinating old town and those woods have probably changed very little over ▶

“

Anita has found extraordinary moments of perception or inner knowing





the centuries,” adds Anita. “Some of the trees are a thousand years old, and standing among them knowing that you could be looking at the same tree that a Norman King looked at, you feel a real sense of timelessness.

Something mystical happened there last winter: on Christmas Eve, as I was walking through the forest, I spotted a birch tree stump into which the weather had carved a face. It looked just like an early king. Then over the following weeks, it morphed into a deer, and it still looks like a deer’s face now. My painting of the woods thus includes a deer’s face, linking the forest today back to the 12th century hunting that took place there. That’s the magic in nature: it serves as a repository for the history of the past, and it’s showing us these spirits in the woods.”

Another painting of the Blenheim Estate shows the Queen Elizabeth Island, named for Queen Elizabeth I who was held prisoner there in the old Woodstock Palace. “It was almost in ruins by the 1600s, and she was tucked away there to keep her out of trouble when her sister Mary was in charge,” explains Anita. “The island is the only remnant of the earlier palace. It was part of the causeway across marshy ground, before Capability Brown landscaped the grounds in the 18th century.

It is a magical island, alive with birds including herons which make almost Jurassic sounds at nightfall. And because herons have changed little ‘apparently’ over millions of years, and because Oxfordshire is where there was once an ancient sea (a Jurassic sea) with plesiosaurs swimming in it, perhaps it’s no coincidence that they sound like little dinosaurs at dusk”, she muses.

Other locations Anita has painted include the “very mysterious church” in Chipping Norton with its green man iconography, and Iffley Church where the stonework is a bestiary of hybrid creatures. Of these, she chose to include a cockatrice – a half-chicken, half-winged reptile thought to guard and protect places in medieval folklore and literature. “The shape of it is remarkably similar to the Archaeopteryx fossils you can see in the Oxford Natural History Museum and so in my painting, you can find early dinosaur-birds evolving into flying cockatrice.”



OXFORDSHIRE
art
WEEKS

For more on Anita and other Oxfordshire artists, visit artweeks.org