

## **Alison Pullen – Q&A**

### **Exhibition: 'In Situ – New Oxford Interiors'**

**6<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

#### **Sarah Wiseman Gallery**

***Alison Pullen: 'There is no place like Oxford and I hope that uniqueness is reflected in the work.'***

**Artist Alison Pullen discusses her influences and processes ahead of her exhibition at**

**Sarah Wiseman Gallery in May 2017.**

#### **What has inspired you most about Oxford – have you a favourite location so far?**

'So far, I've painted at the Botanic Gardens, The Ashmolean, The Sheldonian, Gees and Quod. But I've especially enjoyed painting the Ashmolean Museum. The objects on display are hallowed, precious and mysterious but also tell a story of people. I think that the collections are displayed beautifully, ancient objects taken out of their context and I like the way they are lit. I love the way people move around the museum and how they behave. It's quiet. People are thinking and enjoying. They behave differently than they might do normally, with more respect, almost like they do in a church. Children and school groups are excited and interested.

I also love The Botanic Garden, which is a really special place - the history, even the fact it still exists! The people who work there obviously have a passion. It's a haven. A little piece of somewhere else in the middle of Oxford and it is clearly loved, it's wonderful. Painting there, I am out of my comfort zone particularly as it is a building and a construction but it is all green with plants! I always try and think beyond the object I am painting and what it represents. The plants represent people, maybe. In preparation, I was looking at images of insects and pupae - weather worn and used.

The University and the city of Oxford itself is such an ancient institution and one of a kind. There is no place like Oxford and I hope that uniqueness is reflected in the work.

#### **Can you tell us a little about how you started your career as an artist?**

'I started doing collages when I was sent to an art class every week after school from when I was seven years old to thirteen. As well as all sorts of arts and crafts, my teacher got me tearing out pieces of coloured magazine pages to make pictures. Years later, when I went to the Royal College of Art to do a post-graduate course, I came to the conclusion that of all the different ways of working I had done on my undergraduate course, that it was collage that I had the most affinity with. So, I just concentrated on that for the whole two years.'

#### **What are your major influences?**

'I knew I was interested in atmosphere and a sense of place. I also realised I work well under pressure whilst 'in situ'. My father was an architect and this, and my interest in people meant that I did a lot of drawings of interiors or exterior spaces that people used like parks and cafes. During my degree, I had made a lot of drawings and paintings at night; sometimes from trains, of buildings and houses. Painting rooms in people's houses combines my interest in the people themselves as well as the architecture, light and atmosphere, and working in situ. Painting the room is like a portrait of the person who owns it. That's what's important.'

### **What you do you enjoy most about your work?**

'In the paintings of historic houses, it's the thought of all the people who have lived there. Like layers of wallpaper, each person has left their mark in the room. I often wonder what has happened in those rooms, in the people's lives?'

### **Why do you choose to work in collage?**

'I love collage because in using it you already have something that needs changing. You can leave some elements because the colour or texture fits in. Sometimes there are whole photographs that reference another space or place. I am in control of the process, and yet I am not.'

### **What are the challenges of working in situ?**

'I am sensitive to how comfortable I am in a space. For example, how the people in it react to me or how welcome I am will have an effect on my painting. However, the Ashmolean staff and the staff at the other Oxford locations have been very kind and trusting, particularly in allowing me to use wet media.'

The challenges of working in situ are integral to the work. If it wasn't hard, the work wouldn't be interesting. Working surrounded by the public, it is always hard to keep concentrating but that keeps me on my toes. Logistically, I have to be out of the way of people so they don't trip over me, but I also need to find a place that satisfies me in terms of composition. Sometimes it's cold, or the light is changing fast as the day goes on, or I only have the light for a finite period. I only ever have a few hours anyway as I come up from London and I always work in situ – I don't finish a painting at home. But all this means I have to get on with it which forces me to do just the essential, to get to the essence. I hope it imbues the work with the here and now. There is no waiting for the muse to strike! You have to deal with what you have at the time. But all these things make me think more about the painting which is a good thing.'

### **What memorable responses have you had to your work?**

It depends at what stage people see the work. It's only in the last hour or so that I add the paint and the picture starts to make sense. Some people seem puzzled when they see me; I am sitting on the floor with a white piece of paper in front of me and all the trappings of an artist, but they see me looking through an Interiors magazine! People would love sometimes to just sit and watch me but I do find this difficult as painting feels so private, but that's the nature of the beast. I am working in a public place after all.

### **What are the major developments in your work over the years?**

'When I was at art school in the early '90s, the work was post card sized, and it's become increasingly larger as I have become more proficient in the collage technique. I need the paintings to be larger to be a challenge. Similarly, I will go back to the same places time and again to stretch myself, as I often feel the need to produce something different from the same interior space. The work changes with my moods, the light levels, people around me, what conversations are taking place.'

### **Where do you see your work going next?**

'I have recently enjoyed developing collage techniques, using solid pieces of colour, perhaps after seeing the Matisse cut-outs exhibition in London. I feel a need to make the paintings more obviously collage as I grow more proficient and develop the technique.'

I do also make collages of exterior spaces – I've recently completed a commission of a someone's garden. I am always happy to do something challenging; I think I have a particular affinity with

interiors because they are so personal; I'm interested in how we are, being in them and creating them.'

*Sarah Wiseman Gallery is Oxford's largest independent art gallery, specialising in contemporary painting.*

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