

## **Sarah Wiseman Gallery: Celebrating twenty years**

### **Q&A with Sarah Wiseman, director**

Sarah Wiseman founded her gallery in 1998, just a few short years after leaving university. She graduated from Manchester Metropolitan University with a degree in History of Art with History of Design.

Twenty years later, the gallery has grown to become Oxford's largest independent gallery space, specialising in showing and selling work by contemporary British painters at all stages of their careers. Collectors come to the gallery from the local area, as well as internationally, with many paintings finding homes around the world. Alongside a programme of carefully curated exhibitions, Sarah Wiseman Gallery has appeared at major art fairs in London and Europe, hosted talks and charity auctions, and recently commissioned a public work, which was donated to the Children's accident and emergency department at the John Radcliffe Hospital.

#### **1. Was there a defining moment that made you decide you wanted to open an art gallery – When did you decide you wanted to devote your career to art?**

When people kept telling me that I couldn't! I distinctly remember a conversation with a friend while I was still at university. We were discussing what we wanted to do in the future and I said I wanted to own a gallery. She simply said 'You can't do that!' The idea of it was an impossibility in her mind, but that closed mindedness got me thinking, 'Well why not?' And from that moment it became an ambition, something I considered a real possibility. I began to look for a way to make it happen.

Through studying History of Art, I read about how galleries in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century played a key part in artists' careers. I found it inspiring that the people who help artists to create and keep alive the foundation of this great subject are the gallerists. They are the people brave enough to believe in the artists and find a way to put their work on show to the public. I have always believed in that transformative moment when the artist and gallery work side by side. I loved that energy from my studies and I love it even more now that it is part of my daily professional life.

The step to opening a gallery was quite a funny one really. The catalyst was being turned down for a dream job in a gallery in London as they thought I would be leaving too soon to open up on my own. It was quite a compliment that they feared my ambition. When we met again a few years later at an art fair where I was presenting my own gallery they said 'We should have employed you!'

I am very proud that I have had the courage of my convictions to stand by that initial 'Why not' moment and once I had my gallery, I was going to do all I could in my power to keep it; so, my career path was set.

#### **2. Cast your mind back to opening day, May 1998. What was going through your mind? Had you any idea what to expect?**

If I am honest, I was sick with nerves and I had no idea what to expect. As with any new business opening, the building was a major headache and had taken all my time and energy. Just getting it to a point where we could hang the art work seemed a never-ending journey and then there was a last-minute issue with the lease that almost prevented the gallery from opening in time. When the day finally came, my mind was a blur - it was truly overwhelming. The response on the opening night was fantastic and I will never forget all the friends and family that came along to support me. It was a wonderful and memorable evening.

Opening the next day for business on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1998 was the moment that what I had achieved really hit me. Getting to opening is one thing, almost a picnic compared to the reality of running a day to day business. There was a lot still to do and at aged only twenty- four, I had a lot to prove to myself and the people around me.

**3. What factors were important to you for the gallery when you opened – what do you think sets Sarah Wiseman Gallery apart?**

I always have set my own agenda for the gallery, by sourcing artists personally and curating my own programme. The gallery has grown through the artists and collectors I have met on the journey. This has always been important, to know the artist as a person and to be able to communicate their ideas directly to our clients. It's also important to give access to the work in an easy way and to allow the idea of collecting art to grow naturally in people's minds, and be as uncomplicated and straight forward as possible.

There is so much jargon in the art world and I hope that we do our best to cut through as much of that as possible, so that experiencing the art is the most important thing.

One collector said to me at our 10<sup>th</sup> birthday party that 'you have always had a singular clear vision about how you want to run your gallery and that is why it is a success'

**4. How do you feel Sarah Wiseman Gallery progressed over the years?**

I think as with many businesses, we have matured and changed with the times and so much about running a gallery has changed over the years. Communications is the major thing that has progressed. I have worked with many of our artists for almost 20 years, so I still have files with *letters* and image slides in them. They can be quite nostalgic to look back through!

As a gallery we have matured along with our artists and our audience. I think we are braver in what we choose to exhibit and we have high expectations for what our artists can achieve.

Confidence is a more appropriate measure than progress, as I feel that we progress a little each day. We are so much more comfortable in our own skin, we no longer feel that we are asking to be accepted by the arts community because we have taken our place and proven that you can run a gallery successfully in Oxford. However, I am not one to rest on my achievements and will always strive to do better.

I am also keen to add that I started the gallery on my own, but the gallery is now run by a team of three people. We all are committed to it and its future.

**5. What changes have you seen in Oxford's art scene over the last two decades – and in the UK arts in general?**

I think that the most outstanding area of change overall in the UK arts is the rise in professionalism. Everyone has really upped their game and there are so many more opportunities now. The public are very tuned into the art scene and actively engaged in exhibition attendance and collecting. Owning art is now very much on many people's agenda, which is wonderful and it supports the careers of many artists.

The Oxford art scene will always be led by Modern Art Oxford and the Ashmolean. These two internationally acclaimed institutions continue to develop and put on major exhibitions in the city. We should be very proud of them and be active in our support of them.

The wider art world has developed beyond recognition in the last 20 years, but that has not really rubbed off on Oxford - we still have work to do, I feel. At ground level, Oxford has always struggled with affordable studio space for practicing artists. This has not changed a great deal over the years, OVADA and Magdalen Road Studios do a great job, but there needs to be more for the city to have a truly flourishing art scene. The same is for independent galleries, I lament the fact that there are not more in Oxford, many have come and gone, but it is a hard business to balance and I understand when others lose heart.

#### **6. How would you describe the gallery's programme?**

The gallery programme is a balance between solo and group exhibitions. Artists need the focus of a solo exhibition, it is a place for them to develop and grow new ideas, and it is often a catalyst for the new. This is what makes them both exciting and nerve wracking. Then with the group exhibitions there are moments to make connections within our group of gallery artists and to open up opportunities to show work by new artists. When you work with a large group of artists you find that they are all ebbing and flowing at different rates and need different things from you as a gallery. The key is listening to all of that alongside the conversations you are having with collectors to create the programme. It is a very organic process and one that is always in development.

#### **7. What would you say you look for in an artist?**

What I look for in an artist, is commitment and a strong visual identity. It can be an instant decision choosing whether or not an artist will work for the gallery. I am very visual and that connection has to come across for me very strongly. I also look for potential, to see where an artist can grow to from their current stand point; I ask myself does their work have a sense of longevity and a continuing conversation they can develop.

#### **8. You must be excited for the future of Sarah Wiseman gallery: what do you envisage being the next stage?**

Overall, I really enjoy running the gallery and developing the exhibition programme. I stepped back from the art fair circuit a few years ago, as I found the experience unsatisfying in a curatorial sense. I have found since then that concentrating on the exhibition programme in house is far more rewarding.

I am also mindful that with the internet there are many ways for artists to promote their work and it is important for me to develop the gallery so that we always remain relevant to our artists and collectors.

I am also keen to look outside of the space we have as well and do select projects with the artists. I have worked on a couple before and they have always been very rewarding.

#### **9. What do you think the future holds for painting in general?**

The allure of painting as a medium and form of expression remains very special to a lot of artists and as long as it remains relevant, its future will continue to grow and develop. Artists by their very nature are forward thinkers, looking for ways to capture the current zeitgeist. When this energy is applied to a traditional medium like painting, exciting developments can and do happen. Hence the constant fascination with it as a subject, a medium and an object.

The future of painting will be very much linked to how we experience it. The first encounter now is mostly online, but a painting is a physical object, it needs to be seen to be understood. What interests me is the dialogue we have to create as a gallery with our audience, one that encourages people to come and see the work in an exhibition, engage with it and enjoy the experience in real time.