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Art from the heart

From the heart of Norfolk, their art ranges from Hollywood to the Olympics and from international galleries to a first Norwich exhibition, writes ROWAN MANTELL

NINA AND CRAIG have held art exhibitions around the world; Craig's painting of an Olympian hangs in the National Portrait Gallery and Nina's latest show focuses on an all-time Hollywood great.

But the artist couple are happiest at home in Norfolk. Nina Fowler and Craig Wylie knew they wanted a country childhood for their son – and although Craig comes from Zimbabwe, there was never any question about the countryside they would choose.

"I spent almost every weekend as a child in Norfolk, so I know the advantages of growing up here," says Nina. "My memories of crabbing at Wells, seeing the seals at Blakeney Point, going to the end of the pier show at Cromer, climbing hay bales with my brother, horse-riding and so much more, made me want the same for our son."

So, when Orson was just a week old they moved to Mattishall, near Dereham.

It is also near Nina's parents, Angela and Richard Fowler, who met in Norwich 50 years ago when Richard who had been a Norwich Cathedral chorister was working for a local architectural practice and her mother was working for the EDP. Richard went on to become chief architect for the BBC before retiring back to Norfolk.

"We love shopping for local produce at Swaffham, Dereham and Fakenham markets," says Nina. "We enjoy exploring the nature reserves and public footpaths in and around our area. We also take great pleasure in the smaller delights, such as Paul the fishmonger and the mobile library who both stop regularly outside the house. Most of all I love the seasonal changes and all the activities that go along with them. In the spring ▶



Photo: Douglas Atfield



Top left: Lucia (Knockers V)
by Nina Fowler

Right: Portrait of the artist's son,
Orson, by Craig Wylie

Left: Jimmy, an aluminium
sculpture by Nina Fowler and
Tim Hannam of the Bronzecraft
foundry, Attleborough, using
aluminium partly sourced from a
Second World War aircraft. The
sculpture recreates a famous
photo of James Stewart taken at
Old Buckenham airfield in 1944,
when the actor was serving with
the 453rd Bomb Group

Right:
Dame Kelly Holmes with her portrait,
painted by Craig Wylie

Below:
The Day Cary Grant Came to Norwich,
pencil on paper by Nina Fowler,
photographed by Douglas Atfield



Photo: JORGE HERRERA



we go on snowdrop and daffodil walks.”

This spring Nina has solo exhibitions in London and Norwich, and will have work in galleries in Paris, Germany and the USA during 2017. She is particularly excited about the Norwich show, from Saturday, March 11 to Saturday, April 8, at the Fairhurst Gallery, Bedford Street, Norwich. “The exhibition will be a celebration of Norwich and Hollywood coming together at a particular moment in time,” she says. Cary Grant visited Norwich, as a teenager, performing at the grand Hippodrome Theatre in St Giles with a troupe of acrobats – under his original name Archibald Leach.

But Nina reinvents the occasion. “I had the idea to create an entire show based upon a fictional event,” says Nina. “The viewer will be taken on a tour of intricate drawings, apparently depicting Cary Grant enjoying the sights and sounds of Norwich. Their imagination, can make up the rest.”

Nina is also working on a project with the National Portrait Gallery – where Craig already has a picture.

His portrait of Dame Kelly Holmes was commissioned after he won the prestigious BP Portrait Award.

“In fact this is where our story began as I had a painting in the exhibition that year,” says Nina.

The couple wed at Norwich Castle last spring and they are just finishing converting a coach house alongside their home into a studio.

They work separately, but Nina says:

“Craig always encourages me to take a drawing a little further or be a bit more patient as I am often over-excited to say something is finished. I, on the other hand, encourage Craig to work faster as I love his technique when the brushstrokes are loose and less defined but I also have huge admiration for the works he produces which go beyond the realms of reality, with such detail, layer upon layer of colour and light.”

Craig too exhibits work regularly in London and internationally and Nina says: “He is now finding inspiration in the Norfolk landscape and working on portrait commissions.”

He particularly loves the north Norfolk coast, and a beauty spot even closer to home. “He often takes Orson, our two-year-old son, for a walk around Sparham Pools, where they search for mushrooms and owls!” says Nina. “They’ve also explored the beaches between Winterton and Wells this summer. The RSPB reserve on the Titchwell Marshes holds a special place in our hearts as it was the first walk we took as a married couple. That morning the beach was covered in thousands of razor clam shells which had been washed up – it was nature’s very own art installation on the beach.” ♦

The Day Cary Came to Norwich, by Nina Fowler, will be at the Fairhurst Gallery, from Saturday, March 11 to Saturday, April 8. Fairhurst Gallery, Bedford Street, Norwich, NR2 1AG; 01603 614214; www.fairhurstgallery.co.uk