

The gallery man

Sylvia Vetta meets a man who has turned a lifelong passion for art into a successful career

From childhood, a passion for art pulsed through Aidan Meller's veins but he did not envisage that enthusiasm would lead to a career. When he eventually engaged with the public as an artist he realised he had discovered himself.

He became an artist, a publisher, a gallery owner and with the opening of his third gallery in Oxford, he has become a promotor and patron of a new and exciting group of artists, The Oxfordians.

Aidan was born in 1973 in Leicester. His mother, Christine was a teacher and his father Derek started a construction company.

Aidan said: "I watched my parents work hard and struggle to improve their circumstances. Through their endeavours and their Protestant work ethic my father's business prospered. We have become a family of entrepreneurs. But if you had suggested to me as a child, that I would be entrepreneurial I would not have believed it possible.

"Now in our forties and fifties – my brothers Adam and Ian are older than me – Ian runs the family construction business, Adam has gone into computing and farming and I have become a gallery owner.

"Having changed our circumstances, my parents sent me to a fee paying school, Dixie Grammar school in Market Bosworth. It felt like entering a different world. I was surrounded by wealthy people. I turned up in the family Ford car and they turned up in gold Rolls-Royces. However the education was excellent.

"As a child I was bright, but I have only really done one thing continually and that is art. I have no other strings to my bow. I am fortunate as it is the most intriguing industry. It involves fabulous people doing fabulous art," Aidan said.

"Art is about making connections and connecting to different worlds. And thanks to some help along the way, I have entered a completely different world from my childhood.

"One of those influential people was my art teacher, Geoff Bailey. He was then a young

teacher wanting to prove himself. He was passionate beyond belief. He talked about Picasso as if he knew him. He breathed life into the great artists of the past and made it feel natural that we should be alongside these giants. He made me want to be an artist," Aidan said.

"My parents supported me but developed some marital problems. When I left to go to university, I left extreme anxiety behind me. I consciously thought that was 'their stuff' and I was going to do 'my stuff'. Art pulled me along with the desire for a different life."

Aidan headed for Exeter University where he was taught art and art history by academics Lesley Cunliffe and Robin Mitchell. He said,

"Once again I found myself in another world. This existence was fully academic. I developed a love of art history. It felt like a hotbed of cross-pollination through time," he said. "Exeter broadened my knowledge immensely."

I was surprised but interested by the subject of Aidan's thesis.

"I compared Joseph Wright of Derby with

**Aiden Meller Castaways
with a notebook that
is one of his castaway
items**

Photograph Andrew Walmsley



William Blake. It was a comparison of faith and reason of the mystic and the scientific.”

After university, Aidan’s desire to get into another world transported him to another place but it also felt like travelling back in time. He went to a hill station in Tamil Nadu in India.

He said: “I went to teach at the International School in Ooty. The style of teaching was of the fifties, it was mostly chalk and talk. The immediate environment with its language, cricket and afternoon tea felt like going back to another world. I lived in the west wing of an old Raj mansion.

“I walked through botanical gardens to immerge into squalor, a parallel universe. I was a keen photographer. I photographed the contrasting and disturbing life around me. It was a moving and difficult time.”

One encounter had a profound effect on Aidan.

“On one photographic expedition into the hills behind the school, I was completely on my own when I unknowingly alarmed a large buffalo. We both froze as we looked at each

other in the eye. An idea overwhelmed me. I was more than 5,000 miles from home and friends in an alien environment. What was I doing here?”

Aidan became ill with a serious form of gastroenteritis.

“I was wasting away and losing weight rapidly. The second time I went into hospital, I decided to go home. My mother met me at the airport and drove me straight to Leicester Royal Infirmary and I was admitted to the Tropical Disease Department.

“My body slowly repaired but my mind suffered. I wanted to do something with my life but I did not know what to do. I thought I had left home for good and now I was back aged 22. I slid into a depression. Once I was physically strong enough I returned to Exeter and got a job as a teacher.”

Aidan joined the staff of Sandford Peverell Primary School near Tiverton.

He said: “My father was cross with me and said ‘I am fed up of you telling me what you cannot do. Tell me what you *can* do.’

“Because I was so low at the time, I felt I could not do anything, but it was helpful because it focussed my mind. I asked myself his question and realised that primary school teaching was not for me. I did not think of retraining. I simply applied for a job at Henry Box School in Witney and got it.”

Once settled in Witney and in a happier frame of mind, Aidan returned to his father’s question which had been nagging him.

“‘What can I do?’ The answer eventually came – I can paint. So that is what I did. I painted. I noticed that people responded well to my paintings. I started to sell them and was surprised when they sold,” Aidan said.

“I pondered on what to do with the money. In 1998, I went to the bank and asked for a bank account for the proceeds. I met the bank manager! Can you believe it? In those bizarre days you could actually meet your bank manager, which was a delight. He still has no idea of the influence he had on me.

“As well as helping me set up a business

Continued on page 11

From page 9

account, he suggested that I display my paintings in the foyer. To my surprise all the paintings sold."

This creative success gave Aidan the boost he needed to bring him out of his depression. He sought other outlets for his paintings.

"While still teaching, at the weekends, I exhibited at National Trust houses, at art fairs and other venues," he said. "Other artists noticed me selling well and asked me if I could sell their work too. I thought I was a good artist but I realised that I also had the ability to deal with people and introduce them to the world of art. I was still learning who I was when I started selling other artists work as well as my own. I had become a dealer."

It looked as if his career as an artist was threatened when Aidan was badly injured in a car crash.

"A German tourist was driving on the wrong side of the road when she collided with me. She had gone back in her mind to Germany. The John Radcliffe Hospital did an amazing job on my right hand. Every bone was broken. It took me three months to recover but the upside was that I received compensation and I used it to buy a printing press. After that I was able to sell prints of my work and of other artists."

At this point Aidan showed me one possibility for the island.

"I keep a notebook for ideas and observations. I love these leather-bound books with a flap for holding ephemera. I cannot remember how many I have filled – an awful lot of them."

As Aidan published artwork his business started to grow in another direction and he reduced his teaching hours by going part time.

"I started my publishing business on the dining room table and with one employee as a sales person," Aidan recalled. "We published art images in all their forms, posters, greetings cards, calendars, limited edition prints.

"When the business took off, I reduced my teaching to one day a week and employed two people. By the time I finished teaching, I had 13 staff selling across the whole of the UK.

"I decided to publish a catalogue of all the prints. Some companies give their catalogues away but I couldn't afford to do that. Even though I charged for them, all 2,500 sold. So I produced volume two. I had hit on a demand out of which emerged a publication which I called *Veritasse Magazine*.

"An American lady started to work for me at the time and she said: 'There is nothing like this in the USA' and she was prepared to bet her job on the odds of it being a success in the States.

"I liked her confidence and we set off to pitch our wares at various trade fairs the USA. We sold and sold. It was the most spectacular trip of my life. We even sold calendars and posters to Wal-mart. That meant printing tens of thousands of them," Aidan said.

"At first we tried to print the orders ourselves but it was a logistical nightmare. We opted instead for selling the image rights. We were able to sell image rights to firms in South Africa, Australia and India as well as in the UK and USA.

"To sustain our success we needed customer feedback. We wanted to sell well across the board, not just random success. A sensible person would have commissioned a pilot study,

Continued on page 13



The Aidan Meller Galleries deal in modernist and 19th-century art. Aidan Meller Modernism on Oxford High Street runs an exhibition programme including works by Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró and other 20th-century greats



From page 11

but I decided to see the reaction of the public, face to face, by opening a gallery on The Green in Witney in 2004. To my amazement we had a successful gallery on our hands.

“Soon the gallery was doing better, by selling original paintings, than the publishing company selling prints. We moved from The Green to a more prime location on the High Street.”

“Then I did something which has enabled me to specialise with confidence. I stumbled across Sotheby’s,” Aidan said. “Their executive business programme taught me how to orientate the art world.

“I was able to communicate with the top galleries in the world. I was incredibly privileged being able to question them. It was a formative experience and one that will have even more consequences in the future. I loved the years travelling to and from London.”

Aidan’s confidence had grown so when the shop next door became available he took on the lease and turned it into a café.

“The idea was that it would be an introduction to the gallery. But it was a disaster and I lost a huge amount of money. I had no choice but to close the restaurant and come up with a plan to cover the losses. That is when, in 2006, I opened the gallery in Oxford.

“The High Street did extremely well and we realised we could reach our Witney customers from Oxford. When we closed Witney, we opened our second gallery in Oxford, in Broad Street.”

At this point Aidan sold the publishing business and focused on the galleries.

“It was great to have one focus,” he said.

“Now we only sell top international artists. We also focus on rarer works, especially original works on paper.”

Aidan had the inspired idea that his gallery in The High should specialise in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

Oxford can claim to have been at the heart of two art movements that influenced the world – the Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts movement. Through Oxford graduate William Morris the two movements are intertwined.

The poster girl of the Pre-Raphaelites, Jane Burden was born in Bath Street, off Holywell, and Thomas and Martha Combe, who ran the Clarendon Press and funded the building of St Barnabas Church in Jericho, were early patrons of the artists.

“In the time of the Pre-Raphaelites, the High Street gallery was a cobbler’s. Sitting here I can imagine the painter Gabriel Rossetti walking in to get his boots repaired,” Aidan said.

Aidan remains ambitious. He has just expanded into a third gallery. “I am interested in the whole canon of art, the past, the present and the future.

“The High Street Gallery will specialise further in the older period, Georgian, Victorian and a specialism in the Pre-Raphaelites. The Broad Street gallery will display Modernist art (1900-1960), Picasso and the Paris school, and the new gallery will showcase contemporary art.”

Just as Oxford was at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Aidan would like the city to provide the roots of a new art movement. He said: “My interest in ideas of what makes art, have led me to work for several

years with locally-based contemporary artists who I would like to develop as a distinct group.

“For fun I’m calling them ‘The Oxfordians,’” he said. “My excitement is to get behind these contemporary artists. They will get my undivided attention as I display their work in the new gallery. After that I would like to launch them to the world.”

Out of this long march of art, what would Aidan take to our desert island if he can only take one thing?

Aidan pulled a small object out of his pocket. It was a rare half-crown coin.

“When Charles I and his army were based in Oxford, they needed money and so established a mint in the city. I am sure many readers will be familiar with the Charles I crown in the Ashmolean’s coin collection,” Aidan said,

“They are very rare. Mine was given to me as a present. I learned that Charles had purloined the medieval silver from the colleges and melted it down to make coins. Holding this coin connects me to the history of our city. But I must take art and I am tempted to take two pictures from our current exhibition in Broad Street.

“Thinking about how my art teacher inspired me with tales of Picasso. The gallery has a rare portrait of Picasso’s second wife Jacqueline Roque, which would remind me of the journey I have been on.

“It is a hard choice because I also love the drawing by Chagall of his love Bella. Both are really rare original works.

“I find that inside/outside world where artist use their personal life as a subject intriguing and attractive.”

LE