

Oxfordshire

June 2014

Limited Edition

incorporating Intuition

Observing the future

Artist Weimin He
records the building of
Oxford's Radcliffe
Observatory Quarter

Pioneer of flight

How an Oxford pastry
cook became a famous
balloonist

Tracking down The Hydra

A detective story
with a difference



74

Observing the future

Sylvia Vetta talks to artist Weimin He, who has been recording building work at Oxford's Radcliffe Observatory Quarter since 2009

Artist in residence at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter, Weimin He

Photograph: Cliff Hide

The Radcliffe Observatory Quarter (ROQ) is the most significant development in Oxford for 100 years. This ten-acre site, bounded by Observatory Street and Green Templeton College to the north, the Woodstock Road to the east, Somerville College to the south, and Walton Street to the west, was the site of Oxford's first hospital, the Radcliffe Infirmary.

It is also the site of the Radcliffe Observatory (which was used by astronomers from 1773 to 1934). A recent restoration programme has made this beautiful building in the grounds of Green Templeton College look good as when it was completed in 1794 – and since the hotchpotch of random temporary structures erected by the NHS have been bulldozed as part of the redevelopment of the ROQ site, it can be seen as planned by the building's original architects.

The observatory was built on the suggestion of the astronomer Thomas Hornsby following his observation of the transit of Venus across the Sun in 1769 from a room in the nearby Radcliffe Infirmary.

The observatory building commenced to designs by Henry Keene in 1772, and was completed in 1794 to the designs of James Wyatt, and based on the Tower of the Winds in Athens. The original instruments are located in the Museum of the History of Science in central Oxford, with the exception of the Radcliffe 18/24-inch Twin Refractor telescope, which was transferred to the University of London Observatory.

The building now forms the centrepiece of Green Templeton College.

New building on the site includes accommodation for Somerville College, which opened in September 2011. The Radcliffe Infirmary building is being refurbished for occupation by the Humanities Divisional Office, the Faculty of Philosophy, and the Philosophy and Theology Libraries.

In June 2012, New Radcliffe House, by Walton Street on the ROQ development site, was completed by the construction company Longcross. The Jericho Health Centre moved into the ground floor of this new building shortly afterwards.

A new Mathematical Institute is also being built, and is due for completion in September this year.

The site will also include a humanities building and library and the university also plans to build the Blavatnik School for Government, immediately south of Freud's café on Walton Street. This controversial building has been designed by the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, using a £75m donation from the billionaire Leonard Blavatnik.

There are also plans for public spaces as part of this massive development.

Architect Isobel Hughes, head of conservation and buildings for the university estates service, said: "A lot of people do not realise that the project has created a public pathway linking Walton Street and Woodstock Road, which we hope will be well used."

A series of blue hoardings currently delineate the route and shield the building site. Later this year the hoardings will be used to

Continued on page 66



From page 65

display the work of the ROQ artist in residence, the very talented Manchurian-born Weimin He.

Regular readers may recall that Weimin co-curated the superb exhibition of Chinese Prints at the Ashmolean in 2007, and was asked to stay on a to record the redevelopment of the museum in 2008.

Weimin is as quiet and modest as his talent is prodigious.

His first experience living outside of China was in Belfast during the troubles. He was awarded a Ph.D. in Fine Arts at the University of Ulster, in 2005.

His depth of knowledge applies to both Western and Chinese art.

He said: "I mostly use Chinese techniques but I combine elements of east and west. Having grown up in China, those techniques are part of who I am but I am influenced by both east and west.

"I have already visited the Cezanne exhibition at the Ashmolean three times – and will go again because Cezanne is an inspiration to me," he said.

"An Eastern influence on my work is the 19th century artist Huang Bin Hong. But mostly what I do is neither of east nor west. I try to be open to both so that in Oxford, I have developed a personal style influenced by my experience both here and there. But I do practice Chinese calligraphy every day. It is an art in itself."

Weimin has created about 350 sketches and two long friezes which each contain 24 paintings, recording everything that has happened on the ROQ site since 2009.

Weimin sketched in snow and rain, under both blue skies and grey skies.

Talking about the pink sunrise in his painting of the award-winning mathematics building (opposite page) he said: "That was actually painted from observation – it is not an artificial colour."

The long, cold winter of 2010 was a tough one for Weimin.

"It was so cold that I needed to sketch and paint with both hands. The builders were always on the move but I was stationery and, without gloves, my hands kept freezing. I warmed one up in my pocket while I worked with the other one."

He said: "I do each work slowly. I start with a relatively quick sketch on the site which I finish in my studio using Chinese brush and ink. Most of my work I do on Chinese Xuan paper which is sensitive and absorbent. You can paint on both sides. A shade on the back can subtly penetrate the front and build up layer-by-layer in a manner which doesn't work with watercolour."

But Weimin has also used watercolour and gouache effectively on many of his ROQ paintings. He is also a printmaker and has made a series of eight prints.

His latest is of the new statue of Triton in pride of place in front of the listed hospital buildings.

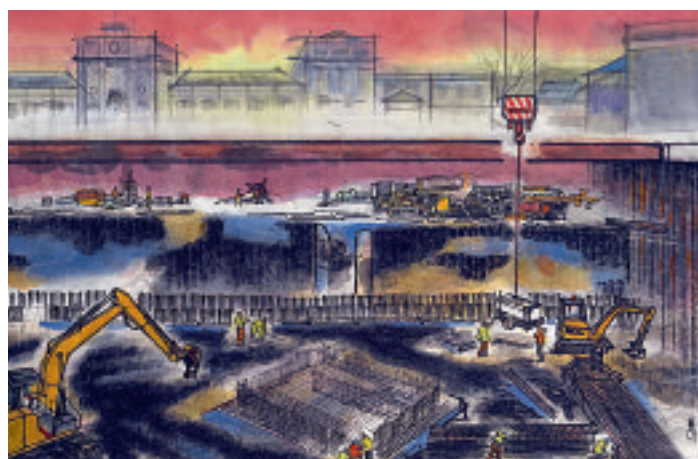
The intention had been to restore the original statue which was made from terracotta and coated with a concrete slurry.

On closer examination, experts – including Isobel Hughes – found that the statue had cracked badly and become porous and was

Weimin He has created about 350 sketches and two long friezes which each contain 24 paintings, recording everything that has happened on the ROQ site since 2009



Continued on page 69



From page 67

likely to fall apart. Isobel said: "We approached Code Ltd and are delighted with the new statue they have made – it is a great replacement for the original Triton and can survive all weathers."

The Radcliffe Infirmary building, which reopened in October, 2012 after refurbishment presented the biggest challenge for Isobel.

She said: "When the NHS moved out, the first thing we had to do was understand the site. We made a gazetteer of all the rooms and some held surprises. Opening two locked rooms we discovered they had no floors."

"Ten years earlier, the NHS knew they were going to leave and neglected maintenance. Since 1948, rooms had been added around and above at random with no plan – the building was a real muddle."

One room that was worth restoring was the boardroom with its panels of red and gold recording donations to the hospital – for instance the King of Siam gave 100 guineas while Mrs Cooper of Charlbury chipped in with two-shillings and sixpence!" Isobel said,

"We restored the panels and also looked for any other features or decorations worth conserving. There was an interesting statue of mother and child attached to the former maternity block."

"We are currently working on the outpatients building and will put that statue on the end of it. Two statues from outside the former Nurses' Home need relocating inside. We are considering putting them in St Luke's Chapel," Isobel said.

"We hope to turn the chapel into an exciting meeting place – a venue that can be used for events and available for hire and not just for use by the university."

Another large part of the site is St Luke's, once the infirmary's chapel.

Weimin has made some beautiful prints looking through the glorious circular stained glass window towards the Observatory.

Isobel said: "The project has an art strategy consultant and we are currently seeking planning permission to erect Simon Periton's 'Alchemist Tree'. We have a fund available for more public art on the site."

Simon Periton is a British artist best known for his intricate paper cut-outs who has recently expanded his technique to create dramatic and complex works on glass with spray paint.

Periton's tree features a crown around its trunk, a symbol connected with growth and transformation and a quest for knowledge.

This sculpture will be complemented by smaller satellite works placed across the site relating to the central tree.

In the meantime, walk the path between Walton Street and Woodstock Road and you will get a feel for this work in progress and later in the year enjoy Weimin's work on display on the hoardings.

It appears that Weimin is chronicling all the major developments for the university in Oxford – he is also artist in residence at the Bodleian Library – and there will be a special exhibition of his work following the development of the new Bodleian building in Broad Street next spring.

■ For more information about the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter visit the website: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/roq/>



Weimin He in the restored boardroom at the Radcliffe Infirmary building. Above, Weimin's woodcut of the iconic Triton statue