



Finding Art that speaks to you

By Katie Miller; Life Magazines



I have a clear expectation from art galleries. They should hold regular exhibitions, serve excellent wine, and provide an eclectic stage for people-watching. Of course, there should also be some art which I might have enough wine to buy.

The pandemic put a hold on those invites, but finally they're back.

So I was curious to hear about a gallery which

neither holds exhibitions, nor relies on alcohol or ambience for sales. What curiosity is this? Within a converted Victorian factory off Ladbroke Grove resides McKay Williamson. Like the gallery itself, it's almost grand but charmingly aloof from ostentation.

I meet with gallery owner Richard Williamson, who is brusquely cool, in that way that only middle-aged men in the arts can be. Surrounded by a variety of art, from landscape to abstract, x-rays to portraits, it feels more like a sitting room than a gallery. Over coffee, Williamson enthuses on his core philosophy, "I believe the art in your life ought to be personally meaningful; that if your home were on fire and everyone was safe, you'd at least think about saving it. That's the point of art, isn't it?" his clearly passionate argument continues, "it should be more valuable than what you paid. We should choose better than whether it goes with the curtains."

Makes sense. But still, I wondered, how can a gallery know what's personally meaningful to its buyers? Williamson responds, "We just ask. In

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person its easier to get to know people. For online queries, we've developed our Art-I-Love Review - which learns both your taste in art and some of the meaningful parts of your life."

Without me asking, he offers some examples. He shares a modern landscape by Peter Wileman, almost abstract, interpreted from a holiday snap. And an abstract piece by Shelley Anderson, for someone whose 'happy place' is the seaside. And portraits, lots of portraits.

"We've all seen a cheesy painting of someone's family, which is what we associate with personal artwork. But those are just bad paintings. Portraits can be made beautifully, if the basic rules of composition are followed. Which often means educating buyers."

This I find intriguing, I am curious how he navigates demanding Londoners.

"To be clear, personal and meaningful doesn't always require a commission. If someone got engaged in Paris, for instance, there's no reason to commission anything. I'll find them a cool cityscape."

"But figurative commissions are full of paradox. Since da Vinci and Caravaggio, we know the sort of composition required for these pieces. I show them examples, both good and bad, and find most people are happy to learn. My job is to ensure every commission is a piece of art first, that just happens to be personalised."

Williamson has curated an impressive set of artists, which include BP Portrait Award, Threadneedle Prize and Frank Herring Award



THE DETAILS

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winners. Walking through his gallery, I see a wide range of artistic styles, from the traditional to the modern. I ask why some of the faces are imprecise, almost vague.

"That's called reportage art. The impressionists taught us that we don't need much facial detail to capture a person. The right body language does it. Some people feel more comfortable being in a painting with a vague, almost wistful interpretation... and it feels more like a memory."

It's all very interesting, even a bit eye-opening. Still I see the x-ray of a skeleton, and a colourful set of butterfly wings, which don't look personal or meaningful.

Williamson explains, "The language of art is full of symbolism and metaphor. You don't have to commission anything, and people do this already. Your favourite piece of art in your home is probably not the most expensive, but the one with the best story. All your art should be like that."

He's right. It's a little sculpture I bought in southeast Asia on my gap year. It's chipped and slightly dirty, but reminds me of a grand adventure. Feeling a bit reflective, I realise that even without the alcohol, I'm tipsy enough to ask, how much was that 'happy place' by the sea? ■

