

Huggy by Grant Waters

Bikers, Boxers and Cowley Road Carnivals

Gill Oliver discovers why artist Grant Waters enjoys depicting the alternative side of life in Oxfordshire

A burly biker in black leather and tattoos snaking down his arm stares out of one. In another, a group of riders relax outside a café with their 'iron horses', including a gleaming Harley-Davidson.

These intimate scenes are among 20 skilfully captured in oils by artist Grant Waters for a new exhibition in Banbury.

Gatherings, which runs at the Mill Arts Centre until October 29, also includes paintings from Cropredy Fairport Convention festival, the Cowley Road carnival and Didcot Cornerstone arts centre.

Huggy the burly biker in the portrait, turned out to be surprisingly domesticated.

Mr Waters explained: "He makes jam and I had to buy a jar or two to get him to sit for that painting."

The father-of-two had the urge to paint the bikers after driving past the H Café near Berinsfield, a magnet for hundreds of them during summer.

He added: "It's near Benson where I teach an art class, so I had been past many times and even popped in once or twice for a cuppa. It was a fascinating scene which I couldn't resist painting."

After sounding out the café owner about what reaction he might expect if he asked bikers to pose for him, the reply came back: "If you are polite, it should be OK".

He said: "Although some were not sure what I was doing at first, they soon became comfortable with the idea."

"I went around photographing the owner as he was clearing tables and got

Huggy to pose for me and then some of the others agreed to be photographed, too. Once they realised I was just there to observe, I think they realised 'OK, he is not being invasive'."

Most artists might be worried about pitching up to a notorious bikers' haunt but Grant Waters has form with this sort of thing.

This is, after all, the man who spent three years photographing, drawing and painting fighters in South Moreton Boxing Club.

Among his subjects was former British and Commonwealth heavyweight champion Julius Francis, whose former opponents include Mike Tyson.

Not only has he painted him twice but he has also sparred with him.

"My wife was shocked to hear I had

Continued on page 130



*Bikers gather at H Café,
near Berinsfield*

*Grant Waters works on a
painting of Cowley Road
Carnival in his studio*

Photograph: David Fleming



From page 129

like me is totally safe with him. He wouldn't dare hit me, because he knows I wouldn't get up again."

Last year, his exhibition *Welcome to the Cage* shone the spotlight on cage fighters, also at South Moreton Boxing Club.

He joked: "Once you have painted big scary boxers, you are not too intimidated by big hairy bikers. They love their bikes and that's all you need to know."

He trained at Berkshire College of Art, is a member of the Oxford Art Society and regularly exhibits during Oxfordshire Artweeks.

And for the past two decades, when not painting at his studio in East Hendred, he has taught oils, watercolours, landscapes and life drawing at Abingdon and Witney College and other adult learning centres.

He made five or 10 visits to the H Café before he had enough sketches and before he could begin painting, there was a certain amount of choreography.

"But it's all authentic," he pointed out. "There's not a bike in the picture that wasn't there."

Another canvas which gives a glimpse into a hidden world is a powerful portrait of a tattoo artist 'inking' a client. He happened to walk past Crazy Joe's Tattoo parlour in Didcot and spotted the tattoo artist at work.

He explained: "I thought 'I must paint that'. I wandered in and asked 'Can I do a painting of you tattooing someone?' He was fascinated by my art, the same way I was by his, so he told me he was going to tattoo his friend on Saturday and to come along."

The tattoo was of the customer's idol, Cliff Burton, former bass player of thrash metal band Metallica who died in a car crash 30 years ago.

Mr Waters added: "I felt as though I was invading their space and it was like watching a craftsman, a jeweller or a clock maker at work. I was in a craftsman's studio - he just happened to be doing his craft on someone's arm.

"And because he was marking someone's skin for life, the whole thing had an incredibly solemn feeling to it - it was strangely moving."

Continued on page 132

*Homage to Cliff Burton at
Crazy Joe's Tattoo Parlour*

Photograph: David Fleming





*Grant Waters with his
painting of Huggy
Photograph: David Fleming*



*Fairport Convention's
Cropredy Festival*

From page 130

Despite the black leather of the bikers, this exhibition has plenty of colour and light, which was deliberate.

Once a painting is finished, it hangs on the wall of the East Hagbourne home he shares with wife Rachel and their sons, Christopher 12 and Joshua, 9.

He explained: "Our house is a revolving gallery and it finally dawned on me that although Rachel is very loyal she was probably thinking 'Can't we have something a bit lighter?'"

But as an artist who leans towards what he describes as the "foreboding and dark", this presented a challenge

He pointed out: "I found it scarier because the powerful, dark ones are easier to do but a bit of a gentler image and lightening up your palette is really hard.

"It's probably a bit like doing light comedy when you've always written black humour."

The result is the exhibition includes a number of colourful crowd scenes, most notably one of Cowley Road Carnival.

He admitted: "You have to feel what you are doing and I was almost dancing while I was painting the Cowley Road one."

His pictures of the Didcot Cornerstone Art centre feature jaunty yellow sun umbrellas which would be at home in the South of France, while those of Fairport Convention at Cropredy (pictured above) are bathed in golden light from a sunset and include the band centre stage and a Morris side performing in the background.

"It suddenly struck me 'Why don't you do it at sunset, then you will have a lovely warm feel?' he said. "I have been there a few times and it always struck me you might be stood in the crowd and next to you could be a guy dressed in Morris dancing gear because he hadn't changed since they performed, so it has always had this incredibly cosy atmosphere."

Not that the boxing club pictures were all gloom and doom.

He recalled: "Probably because I felt a bit intimidated, when I did the boxing club sketches and photographs I put on my rock-and-roll face and actually had some of the boxers telling me to 'cheer up'."

Now he's on a new mission, already thinking about the next exhibition and inspired recently while in a tea shop.

"We had vintage china and the woman who owned it was dressed in 1950s clothes and I thought it would make a great painting.

"I want to capture people who look like they really belong in their work space and I can't wait to get started."

LE

• *Gatherings is at The Mill Arts Centre in Banbury until October 29. For more information, visit www.grantsartwork.co.uk or www.themillartscentre.co.uk*



*Grant Waters works on a
painting of Cowley Road
Carnival in his studio
Photograph: David Fleming*