

DAVINA BARBER

Norfolk by Design



TEXT BY FRANCES HOPEWELL SMITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK ILOTT

Davina Barber is energetic and focused, a hard-working and informed art enthusiast on a mission. She identified the need for a unique show of Norfolk art and, with Bedfords as enthusiastic sponsors, turned her nascent idea into beautiful reality.

Exceptional People

Not far from Burnham Market in North Norfolk, the ruins of Creake Abbey are the setting for an intriguing and inspirational art show. The organisers are 'Norfolk by Design', a collaboration forged in 2014 between Davina Barber and co-curators Paul Vater and Paul Barratt. This morning they are all busy in two adjoining Norfolk stone barns, unwrapping and arranging all the artworks. More pieces arrive by the minute. There are easels, ladders and boxes everywhere, pictures propped against walls ready to be hung and mysterious objects covered in thick paper. It's hard to believe that in just twenty-four hours' time everything will be ready for the two day event, but Davina is confident: "I know it will be done in time and we're not panicking, yet!" Talking as

she cuts pieces of background cloth, she explains how it started. "I studied history of art at Bristol then got a job in London at the Dickinson gallery, specialists in Old Masters, then four years in contemporary art with Timothy Taylor." Marriage and



twins led her to leave the city and come back to East Anglia. "I was born and brought up here, so it's always been home, the place I love."

Settled back in Norfolk with a new, self-initiated job as artefact and furniture finder, Davina uncovered a surprising number of talented artists, designers and craftspeople, most of whom had little or no opportunity to exhibit. It was this untapped wealth of artists which gave Davina the idea to group them together and get them the audience they deserved. "I found people by word of mouth and by research. A lot of them are here, in the Norfolk countryside, and just need encouraging out of their studios into a sympathetic venue," she says, "so we keep things low key – approachable but professional."

The title for this show is 'Nature' and the intention is to 'showcase artists and designer-makers'. And it succeeds – the sheer variety of imaginative skill is breathtaking. Davina gives a running commentary on the pieces as they are displayed. Here are delicate circular collages in white, made up from owl pellets and a round of razor clam shells in perfect symmetry by Liz McGowan. Then two

ghostly depictions created from smoke by Maria Pavledis, the swirls of grey to black morphing into wildlife images. Then Davina points out a long, narrow side table, its top a dark, deep brown, resting on conical plinths by Toby Winteringham.

This is bog oak," she explains, running her hand along the impossibly silky top, "probably five thousand years old."

Through in the second barn a central sculpture dominates the space. Alec Birkbeck has welded old tool blades into a larger than life bird of prey, its wings outstretched and head pointing down. Incredibly, it's balanced on a block of wood and sways effortlessly to the lightest touch, capturing the bird's combination of grace and strength. Stylised ceramic shells or gnarled bark vessels sit next to ranges of smooth, patinated wooden dishes. Still life oil paintings and haunting photographs are arranged with sensitivity to their best advantage. "This large work by leading photographer Frances Kearney took us an hour and a half to hang," Davina says. "We had to work out how to secure it because it's heavy and we didn't want to damage the walls. It was a bit nerve-wracking!"

Davina is proud of her achievement and of the quality and diversity of the works they have collated. "I've done pop-up shows but wanted to prove I could do something bigger and better. There's such a huge stable of good artists right here." She and her two co-curators have certainly done a fine job in their selection and presentation. They call for her help with a newly-arrived delivery and she is off at once, dragging some bubble wrap behind her and definitely not panicking.

www.norfolk-by-design.com



This spread: Davina at work on the exhibition held in the grounds of Creake Abbey