

LIFE

Oman is one of the world's best kept secrets

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Tim Saunders

This is the second in a new series of articles exploring the many and varying styles of artists.

Since establishing herself as an official military painter Alix Baker has decided to paint in a less illustrative and confined way resulting in a constantly evolving style.

“I paint mainly in acrylic and oil but acrylic has to be the medium of choice at the moment in order to have work dry for exhibitions,” she explains.

“I hope to return predominantly to oils when I can get ahead of myself. In my search for a looser style I find myself drawn to slightly more abstract interpretations.”

Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Dubai have inspired Alix to use light and dark within her work.

“The dark and light is something that first appealed to me when working in hot countries

with very strong light and deep dark shadows where treatment of the shadows created the feeling of heat beyond them. Viewers of these paintings appear to like what I'm doing in that more contemporary direction and I look forward to exploring it further."

A friend once told her: "Oman is one of the world's best kept secrets."

And so it was that in 1971 Alix first visited Oman when being evacuated from the India-Pakistan War.

"I had been working in the British High Commission in Islamabad on a short attachment," she recalls. "We landed on Masirah Island but were kept in an air force hanger and fed oranges. At that time my future husband was seconded to Oman's Desert Regiment and engaged in actions against the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman in the Dhofar Rebellion in the south of Oman and on the Yemeni border. Eventually he was invalided back to England and we became engaged. Little did we know that a chance to return to Oman, a place and people he had become very fond of, would come up in the future."

Fifteen years later Alix returned with two small children. Her husband, Tom Bremridge, had been posted to the Arab state as the last British Chief of Staff of the Omani Army. "As a military artist my life had been dominated by commissioned paintings for military units and museums."

At that time there were few artists practicing in Oman and only gradually did art materials become available. "An exercise I enjoyed doing was painting or drawing just the strong shadows of buildings or trees. It was fascinating to see how a picture would gradually appear with nothing else set down.

"Oman is a fascinating and beautiful country with the most delightful people and a painter's paradise.

"The north and south of the country are so different and roads being fairly scarce when we were there a lot of exploring and camping was undertaken most weekends and notes and photos taken for future paintings.

"Sadly, painting on location was impossible with the heat, small children and being constantly on the move.

"By the time I left in 1989 art was thriving and exhibitions were appearing in hotels and in the first gallery in Ruwi.

"I exhibited several times with great success and, on leaving Oman, I came away with an order for a very large series of paintings of HM Sultan Qaboos Bin Said's armed forces and police.

"Many uniforms and figures with real and recognizable faces - to be started in the cold of February in England! I had also undertaken many commissions from Omani units, messes and officials, and designed various forms of dress for palace staff wear."

Alix and her husband returned to Oman in 2006 and more material for paintings was gathered. "Since then I have visited Dubai and Al Ain while my son was living in the former. He had visited Oman and discovered prints of my paintings were on an office wall at his old school, a fact that established his identity and, being the school holidays, he was given

the keys to explore the school he had so much enjoyed.

“Ever since my husband’s first time in Oman we have kept in touch with Oman and Omanis that he knew, or their friends visiting England on courses. We are now into keeping an eye on the third generation. “Oman continues to crop up in my paintings and long may it continue to do so. As more and more people visit the state, it is no longer such a secret place and my paintings are less of an oddity at exhibitions but they are still frequently acquired by others who also love the country and people. I am lucky in that I find an interest in my more ‘tweaked’ work as I do in that which is more literal.”

She concludes: “Creating a painting is like gathering together what appear to be random notes of music and creating a chord that resonates in someone’s heart or head. If I can achieve that, I’m happy.”

For more information visit: www.alixbaker.com