A Moveable Feast:
At Home and Abroad with Francesca Shakespeare

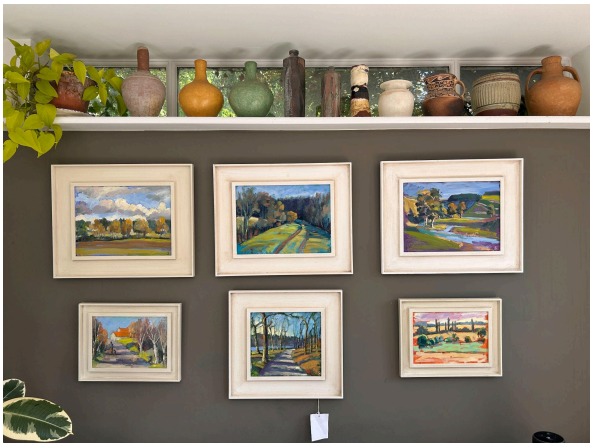
For Francesca Shakespeare, painting never ceases to be a luxury. She knows the value of things: of precious moments between responsibilities, fleeting changes of light, the value of art supplies and relationships that are the building material of her artistic life. “To paint, I need brightness, sunshine, and people”, a maxim that shines through her colourful, confident artworks. A well-known figure in the North Oxford art scene, Francesca Shakespeare leads by example. One would be forgiven for assuming that as a resident of Oakthorpe Road, set within the square mile of Oxford’s Summertown – one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in the country that J.R.R. Tolkien, Iris Murdoch, Colin Dexter, and Thom Yorke have called home – Francesca leads a carefree life of leisure. Yet a closer look reveals a household that is run efficiently, frugally, with a great deal of hard work for the professional artist, educator, Oxfordshire Artweeks coordinator, as well as wife and mother of three children (now in their 30s).

“I have always had to earn a living with my work”, Francesca beams, remembering her successful yet arduous career as a muralist and decorative artist when she lived in London in the 1990s. This has given way to a more flexible painting practice, which unfolds both in her studio and on her travels across the UK and abroad. Bold strokes of colour are layered with quick, confident precision to craft scenes of nature bathed in the golden light of solar transition, capturing the places that are important and pleasurable to the artist. The work is firmly rooted in reality but engagingly subjective. To see the world through Francesca Shakespeare’s eyes is a joyful experience.

Beautifully arrayed in her garden studio and coming alive in the May sunshine, a selection of large, bold landscapes await the launch of 2025’s Oxfordshire Artweeks. This year the exhibition also includes a selection of works by her students and artist family members. Returning year after year as both coordinator and exhibitor, Francesca Shakespeare has helped to shape the Summertown edition of one of the UK’s largest open studio festivals, alongside artist friend Susan Moxley and others. Galvanizing the locals into attending art events on their doorstep is no easy feat, and the full house at

the private viewings and steady footfall throughout the festival is testament to the constellation of relationships that sustains Francesca's practice: creative family members, students past and present, friends, and of course her collectors.

Every year, Francesca's tasteful living room, kitchen, garden, and garden studio transform into a gallery. Personal items are cleared away, an exhibition panel is erected in the garden, printed materials are arranged strategically, and the unmistakable Artweeks signage lures visitors in. A friend once jokingly remarked that the festival's longevity is assured by the opportunity it affords to snoop around people's houses, but not every participant boasts such magnetic power! "I have amazing relationships with my buyers and know why they like my work", Francesca shares. Her previous collaboration with the New Grafton Gallery in London and Eastwood Fine Art in Hampshire gave her an additional portal to the public, and she is open to being represented by a gallery again, which would give her the opportunity to showcase larger works.



Francesca observes that both her sunlit kitchen and her garden studio are the same size – the two spaces exist in tandem, a short amount of grass apart. "I love playing around with the materiality of painting", approaching her studio work "like a kitchen full of ingredients", like baking a cake with no recipe using egg tempera, encaustic wax, gold leaf… as well as more cost-efficient plaster and skip wood. Older works are sometimes reworked or painted over, and nothing is lost in the financial equation of her circulating economy. An independent artist, many of her artworks have found new homes both in Oxfordshire and further afield.

Experimenting continually with materials, textures, and pigments in her studio, Francesca is also a passionate plein air painter. Francesca describes her early paintings as observational, fast, on-the-spot, created while on holiday with her young family, with "paints in nappy bags" – an image that many remember from her frank public talks. Francesca graduated with a BA in Fine Art and Italian from Exeter University, has partnered with the Ashmolean and Modern Art Oxford, taught at the Ruskin School of Art, St Clare's College, and Asthall Manor, and is a member of the Oxford Art

Society. Yet in her own words, she is “not snobby about art”, pointing to the parallels between the thrills and spills of motherhood (sometimes quite literally!) and creativity.

In her travels, Francesca has made the most of various family bases – in Dorset, Crete, France, and southern Portugal, which appear in her paintings. She recounts the stories of her branching “patchwork family”, with its bohemian spirit and joie de vivre, the oldest of four siblings whose parents both remarried and lived lives to the beat of their own drum. Stinsford Studios in Dorset, created by her sister Sophie and brother-in-law Julian Bailey, both artists, is a second home – a nexus for visual artists (many of whom are members of their large, talented family), an exhibition space, and a rural retreat a stone’s throw away from Thomas Hardy’s grave.

In recent years, the Maison Rose in Quercy, southwest France, a magical house steeped in history, has become another creative base where students join Francesca and her husband Christopher for a painting holiday, adding to the star-studded guest book that has included members of the Churchill family. A history and literature enthusiast, Christopher has developed a tour of the Moissac Abbey cloisters and other places of interest for the residents. The Maison Rose painting holiday is in its second sell-out year and is likely to return. There are also plans to introduce residential courses to Stinsford Studios in Dorset. Sophie Bailey says of her sister Ches: “She gives people confidence to make a mark, she is the most energised, friendly person, a great communicator in everything that she does – her work and her teaching”.

An artist in every aspect of her life, prospective projects for Francesca include a long-awaited trip to the Indian subcontinent with its riot of colour and rich history, and an environmentally-conscious exploration of southern Portugal’s increasingly threatened cork forests. Francesca and Christopher also want to follow in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, the prolific travel writer S.P.B. Mais who wrote over 200 travel books, to create a series of sketches and reflections.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf invents the fictional Judith Shakespeare, sister to William, who is born with all the same gifts but is not sent to school and dies in ignominy in London’s Elephant and Castle, to illustrate the odds stacked against women who choose to pursue a creative path. Almost a century later, women continue to carry the double burden of care across the social spectrum. Yet it would be difficult to imagine that a life of splendid isolation and singular creative effort would have suited Francesca better. Woolf advises aspiring women writers to write concisely, an ethos that permeates the artist’s observational paintings, created in response to what she sees, savouring each session like only a woman with lots to do can.

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