



Artist's studio

A FAMILY AFFAIR

Caiti Grove visits artist duo Arthur and Erica Timothy at their home-cum-studio in Bath

‘I was on my way to lectures with my friends,’ Arthur Timothy confesses with a smile, ‘and suddenly I noticed this very attractive girl who walked past us in the opposite direction. I turned around to look at her and my friend elbowed me and said, “You got no chance there, mate”. I asked “What do you mean?” He replied, “She’s in my Hall of Residence and she’s very aloof”.’

That was this artistic couple’s very first encounter, an admiring glance in the Arts Tower of the University of Sheffield architecture department where they both studied, Erica landscape design and Arthur building design. It was not until weeks later, at the Student Union ball, when their eyes met. It was the start of a love affair – and a brilliant business partnership.

At their Regency town house in Bath, sunshine coats the sandstone exterior and inside their work fills a drawing room elegant enough to make any *Bridgerton* fan swoon: Erica’s almost-three-foot-tall pots gather next to the fireplace and smaller silvery white creations sit on a sideboard under their ever-growing collection of wall-hung modern art. Two of Arthur’s paintings – both about five-foot tall – face each other. In one, his mother stands with her sister and a friend. Opposite, Arthur’s parents sit together, captured before he and his brother were born.

Arthur entered these two paintings for the Royal Academy’s Summer

Exhibition in 2019 – his first attempt to go professional. Amazingly, they were both accepted. ‘It was very strange to see my paintings amongst established artists,’ Arthur tells me, as we sit with a coffee at their mahogany dining table. ‘People remarked, “Why haven’t we heard of Arthur Timothy, where has he come from?”’

So how did it all start? Their son Duval, the middle of three grown-up children, stretched a canvas and presented it to Arthur at Christmas a few years ago. ‘It was definitely a challenge: it really put me on the spot.’

The canvas sat on an easel in Arthur’s architecture practice in Tower Bridge for months. ‘I would walk past it and think, “I’ve got to do something with that, Duval got it for me”. That went on for months.’

Arthur finally painted the work – and so began a very short and steep progression in his new career. ‘During the Royal Academy exhibition, someone approached me and asked if I would be interested in an exhibition in a gallery in Mayfair [the Ronchini Gallery]. They needed about eight paintings. Could I do that? So I did,’ he explains simply. ‘I had a year to do them.’ Now Arthur is absorbed in preparation for exhibitions with Gallery 1957, at both its Ghanaian and Hyde Park galleries.

The studios in their Bath house are downstairs in the former servants’ quarters. In Arthur’s studio, shelves of books and brushes line one wall

and an architect’s model of a project in Accra called Africa Lake sits in the corner. In the middle, three canvases balance on three easels. One is his late aunt Evelyn Dove, a jazz singer who studied opera at Royal Academy of Music, performed in New York, Paris and Bombay, and was a regular on BBC radio. On canvas, she is dressed for the stage, with layers of pearls and bright eyes looking up from under a hat decorated with jewels. In another work, Arthur’s mother sits, determined, maternal, hopeful.

‘I do feel her spirit, her presence, when I paint her,’ Arthur says, rolling his work around to capture the best light for photographs. ‘My mother is from Ghana, and my father from Sierra Leone. I was born in Ghana but we moved to Sierra Leone when I was a baby until I was nine, when my father’s job brought him to London.’

Arthur and his brother went to Queen’s College in Taunton where they learnt rugby and art, but his younger years return to him most strongly. ‘People say I sound English but, you see deep down, I still feel quite African. I have very strong, very fond memories of growing up there.’

When Arthur’s father died, he inherited trunks that remained unopened for a few years. ‘The thing is, when a parent dies and you have to go through their things, it’s really quite an emotional ordeal so I put it off for a long time,’ Arthur reflects. ‘But when I did, there were some amazing photographs of my father’s life, when he met my mother before they were married, pre-independence in Ghana, the colonial period and the great transitions that happened when Ghana gained independence in 1957 under Nkrumah.’

A few years after independence, Arthur’s father – a journalist at the time – spoke out about the president’s excessive lifestyle. He was deported back to Sierra Leone, his presence considered ‘not conducive to the public good’.

Arthur worked from the photographs to create the painting now hanging in his drawing room. ‘The photos are black and white, but I remember that dress,’ Arthur says, gesturing to his mother wearing a colourful patterned shift dress. ‘So I put the colours in as I remember them.’

One floor below, Erica’s pots stand on every surface of her studio, and a kiln sits in the corner. She presents one of her ‘bottom pots’ – two smooth bum cheeks captured in brilliant, peachy realism. ‘I’ve always hand built; the first one I made in slabs and cut and joined. And then I got into coiling, if you’re throwing on a wheel, I mean, big strong men can do big pots, but generally, you’re limited to the size and the shape that you can do on a wheel. I like building quite big and more organic. This,’ Erica says, pointing to a large pot that looks reminiscent of classical Greece. ‘It might take several weeks to build. I coil it and then cover it and let it gain strength, then fire it, glaze it, and fire it again. And then,’ she says with a wry smile, ‘My dog knocks it over and it’s in pieces.’

Erica began her career in architecture working on projects in the Middle East, travelling out to Libya and Bagdad for site visits. Later, she worked on refurbishing the Barbican’s roof and Tate Britain’s gardens before joining Arthur at his architectural practice - they have worked together ever since.

‘It’s nice to think you can change,’ says Erica of her creative projects and career, ‘you’re not set on one route’.

Outside her studio, a ping-pong table is set up, ready for a chance game between the two artists. Erica challenges me to a point, and hands me a bat. ‘But I should warn you,’ she says smiling, ‘we’re both pretty good.’ After seeing their work and this house, I believe it.

Arthur Timothy is at Gallery 1957 from 1 Dec to 14 Jan 23. gallery1957.com ■



Erica and Arthur Timothy met at architecture school - they now both work out of their studios at home in Bath

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