



Gallery of the month: CORNWALL CONTEMPORARY, PENZANCE

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman/www.ocean-image.com**

To step inside Cornwall Contemporary, a fixture at the top of Penzance's historic Chapel Street for nigh on five years, is to encounter a welcoming, ebullient and attractive presence in the form of the gallery director, Sarah Brittain. It is also to discover an Aladdin's cave of a gallery, for Cornwall Contemporary seems to go on – and up – forever.

The gallery's art and sculpture is of the highest quality, with many of west Penwith's leading artists always on show. There is plenty to savour in paintings by any of regulars such as Neil Pinkett, Daphne McClure, Nancy Pickard and Maggie Matthews, to name just a few. Overall, the atmosphere is

restive, tranquil and harmonious – just right for an art gallery.

But if there is more to Cornwall Contemporary than meets the eye, the same is true of its director. Sarah may be known for her devotion to her artists, but she is a woman of surprises. As she reveals, unexpectedly but deadpan: "Every year I travel to the Nevada desert for The Burning Man festival. It's got a reputation that precedes it, but rather than an exercise in abandon it's actually an arts-based festival featuring an incredible array of exciting and different art. Yes, there are Mutant Vehicles [specially customised vehicles with a maximum speed of 5mph, which have to be registered at the

'Department of Mutant Vehicles' before the annual event], yes, there are a lot of free spirits, and yes, the festival in the middle of the desert might not be the most conventional around, but it's a tremendously inspiring event. I love it."


Sarah attends the Burning Man festival with her husband Dom, a noted framer who is often to be seen helping her at Cornwall Contemporary's popular private view nights. "We're part of a team who are commissioned to create large scale sculpture in the middle of the desert. Last year we created the Mant Farm, along with friends from Seattle who are part of a group called the Sober Free Society."

A homage to the earth's first metropolis, and its builders – ants – the Mant Farm was a dramatic and immersive vertical maze. As Sarah says, with no little understatement: "Not many people know I do this sort of thing", but what many people do know is that she runs one of the most professional and respected galleries in Cornwall. No surprise, indeed, that Cornwall Contemporary has just been selected to be a member of CultureLabel.com, an exciting new Arts Council scheme whose partner members include luminaries such as the Tate, Saatchi, V&A and Whitechapel galleries as well as the Southbank Centre.

"It's very exciting to be part of CultureLabel.com, a

curated website that brings together an edit of the most stylish products and affordable art from galleries, artists, independent stores and museums from around the world," says Sarah, who this summer shows work by two much-loved artists, Maggie Matthews and Neil Pinkett.

Herself a graduate of Falmouth College of Art (in 1996), Sarah is also an author - of *Behind The Canvas*, a book profiling 40 artists living and working in Penwith – and she has collaborated in the production of numerous artists' catalogues and books. That much is well known about her, so too that she is passionate about the artists represented by Cornwall Contemporary, but is she sure she's happy for the world to know of her love of The Burning Man and all its craziness?

"Why not?" she says. "Life is for living, and the art there is wonderful." Well said – and well done on the ongoing success of Cornwall Contemporary. 

Cornwall Contemporary is at 1 Parade Street (top of Chapel Street), Penzance TR18 4BU. See www.cornwallcontemporary.com, tel 01736 874749. Showing this summer are Maggie Matthews, July 15 to August 8, and Neil Pinkett, August 12 to September 5.