

Painting the TOWN

Beatrice Ridley is taking art to glamorous new places. Catherine Sidwell meets the Barnes artist and entrepreneur ahead of a West End show

Beatrice Ridley smiles warmly as we enter the spacious white interior of her family home in Barnes. We are surrounded by a selection of striking contemporary paintings. Beside one of her own recent commissions sits a selection of works by artists from Britain and beyond. Beatrice has been busy choosing paintings for *Gold Fusion*, next London show of *The Pepper Gallery*, which she founded last year.

Elegant, animated and charming, the former litigation lawyer has the passion of an artist, coupled with the commercial awareness, resourcefulness and determination of an entrepreneur. However, it wasn't until her mid-thirties, while on maternity leave from her role as a director with *Deloitte*, that she was prompted to change careers.

"I think it was my first free afternoon, I went out and bought paints and canvases and painted," she recalls. "It was a total revelation and I told my husband that very evening that I wanted to resign from being a lawyer and become an artist."

Her husband suggested that she take an art course first – it was 2008, the height of the banking crisis – but Beatrice insisted that she did not have the time.

"I said: 'Look, I'll do a deal with you. I'll do whatever I can within my leave.'"

Fortunately he agreed.

Next morning she booked the *Lennox Gallery* in Fulham for her first solo show in 2009.

"Then, to make sure I couldn't get out of it, I emailed all the people I knew. I had five months to teach myself to paint, and to a sufficient standard to be exhibited."

Whenever her new daughter slept, Beatrice would paint. Time became invaluable in her usually busy social life. In the end, she produced 40 paintings and sold 80% of the collection.

"Some of them were still drying," she laughs.

Not surprisingly, she continued to find time to paint and exhibit. Then she resigned from her corporate career.

At art fairs Beatrice would encounter other artists who wanted to exhibit as she had, and it was this that led her to set up *The Pepper Gallery*. With two young children, exceptional time management skills and flexible childcare, she runs her "floating gallery" from home and is loving every minute of it.

The idea of a floating gallery – a term coined by Beatrice herself – is that the work of established and emerging artists can be viewed online, at shows or by appointment, rather than at permanent premises. This month's *Gold Fusion* will include a drawing by Henry Moore and work by sculptor Nic Fiddian Green, plus a selection from the evocative landscapes of Michael Bennallack Hart; the intimate portraits of Paul Wright; large-scale expressionist work by the Argentine Eduardo Hoffman; smaller, subtler pieces by New York artist Alicia Rothman; and Beatrice's own new studies of the human form.

For the increasingly glamorous shows, many of which attract major sponsors, Beatrice enjoys selecting themes which have a synergy with the chosen location. So far venues have included galleries and showrooms in Mayfair, Kensington Church Street and Piccadilly. *Gold Fusion* coincides with the centenary of *Aston Martin* – the art is to be exhibited alongside the sleek sculptural form of the new *Vanquish* model at *Stratstone Aston Martin* on Park Lane.

Entirely self-taught, Beatrice has perhaps inherited her creative flair from her Scottish grandparents, both of whom studied drawing and painting at *Edinburgh College of Art* in the 1920s. Her grandmother, she says, was an inspiration – "vivacious and full of spirit". Sadly she never met her grandfather, a watercolourist who felt uncomfortable with the commercial side of the art world. By contrast, Beatrice is in her element.

"Despite being a lawyer, I don't believe in contracts – for me, it is a gentleman's agreement. The artists stay with me if



Beatrice at *Aston Martin* with one of the artworks from the forthcoming *Gold Fusion* show: 'The Pinnacles, Dorset' by Michael Bennallack Hart
Photo by Jack Lawson

they are happy, and I stay with them if I'm happy. Otherwise we part ways. I also believe that artists should be promoted as much as possible. The more well known they become, the better for everyone."

Almost five years on, is her husband happy with her change of career?

"He's delighted. In fact, he's now an entrepreneur too. Before that he was an investment manager, so we both left stable jobs. He's now doing this really exciting start-up in the US."

"We're both having a ball. It's so much fun. Life's too short. If there's something you want to do and you think you can make a success of it, why not do it?"

Beatrice Ridley, it seems, is very good at taking her own advice.

■ The *Pepper Gallery Gold Fusion*, Jun 11-15, is at *Stratstone Aston Martin*, 133 Park Lane. Prices circa £900 – £100,000. Visit: thepeppergallery.com