



RED DRAGONS and VELVET

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE ART FOR ORANGE ARTIST LARISSA BLAKE.

STORY BY DIANA SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY CONTRIBUTED





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Her paintings are captivating for their sweeps of dimension building, expressive strokes. Worked in pure dancing colours, her figurative abstractions of still lifes and street scenes are filled with energy and light.

I'm talking about Larissa Blake and we are in her Studio. I don't where to look as it's an Aladdin's Cave – a light-filled one – with sweeping views of Orange through a large window; brushes standing at the ready; scrunched paint-tubes and dribbled-on sample pots. There're canvases being stretched; her Dad's toy (a vintage Rolls Royce he'll restore one day); the sturdiest easel I've seen; paintings propped around the room; and a welcoming nook of colourful pink, orange and red cushions and lounges. Oh yes, and a kitchenette for making all important cups of tea. Larissa confesses "I've learnt that studios are a lot like handbags, the bigger they are the more you put in them."

On reviewing a creative year, Larissa is happy that her calendar is full until November, but she admits drawing the line for her artistic sanity. Constantly processing, her mind is buzzing with ideas from her exhibition in Hong Kong as well as the next opening, so her pace won't slow for a while.

Larissa grew up in Orange and completed a Communications degree at the University of Canberra, then moved to Sydney where she started her career working in publishing for an architectural and design magazine called Monument.

"My parents are Loretta and Barry Blake. My mother is a very well respected and accomplished artist, who was my first and most significant painting teacher."

She adds, "Then, in my late twenties I finally admitted that art was what I wanted

to do, although I had no formal qualifications. I gradually reduced my paid employment to make way for an art practice and attended workshops with artists I admired. I was given an opportunity to teach painting, which I loved and have been a painter and educator now for almost 20 years. I returned to Orange in 2011, and consider myself a local as my family and our son Sam is here."

Travel inspires Larissa's work and her perennial popularity may come from her keen sense of place. Having idyllic surrounds and loving everyday things and travel provides many opportunities for a reinterpretation of traditional themes. "Gardens, flowers and interiors have been a constant source of inspiration for my art. Colour is my passion and I am drawn to master painters who love colour and paint, particularly the Australian painters Aida Tomescu, Ann Thomson and Elizabeth Cummings."

So, what is in the calendar? "After returning from the Affordable Art Fair in Hong Kong in May, I was excited about the launch of The Byng Street Hotel in Orange. I've had the pleasure of working with the incredibly talented Louise Spicer of One Four Interiors before, and am so thrilled to have my work featured in the new boutique accommodation, which opens this spring. It's been an enormous task for the new custodians to restore the old home Yallungah into magnificent contemporary accommodation while being sensitive to the heritage and history.

"In August each year, my husband Matt - who owns Thomson's Garden Centre - and I go to Melbourne for the Gift Fair which is a great opportunity to have a gallery fix. I'm also working on a new body of large pieces for Studio Gallery Melbourne for their gorgeous new premises in High Street, Armadale."

Larissa's Hong Kong trip has a serendipitous feel. She simply noticed an acquaintance gallerist's Instagram post looking for artists to exhibit. "I rang him, chatted and sent images of my work, and he said 'I genuinely love your work, and I think your work will fit really well within the stable of artists we've got.' So, I said 'I'm keen, let's do it!'"

But as the exhibition was wholly curated, hung and manned by Global Gallery and there was nothing left for Larissa to do, she jumped at being a tourist and went with a girlfriend (who owns Art Est Art School in Sydney and who has friends in Hong Kong). "I wasn't intending to go, I was just going to send the work over," she laughs.

They ended up staying the three nights in magnificent accommodation in a 36th-floor apartment with great views of the city. Their hosts spoil them with day trips and trying little bars. "We did lots of walking and enjoyed the local vibe," she says. "The big cultural change was so inspiring. I've got such a full head now of great images to work from. It was amazing. I collected untold creative ideas and photos."

Given Larissa's eternal quest for balance, all her works are deeply personal and autobiographical. Not surprisingly adding, "I am currently drawn to a more minimal aesthetic in an attempt to find a quieter more peaceful response to the business of life."

"I love the quote by artist Jean-Michel Basquiat 'Music is how we decorate time, art is how we decorate space.' I think art is important in our increasingly busy and fast lives as it provides an opportunity to stop and reflect," she says. "Art has the power to uplift and inspire." Also, if you are lucky enough to view her upcoming works be sure to look for any dancing red dragons. **BMI**

