

Renowned wildlife artist Joanna May invites us to her home in Keevil, as she celebrates her wedding.

FOR AN artist life is something of an adventure. Renowned wildlife painter Joanna May has captured in intricate detail the hares of the Marlborough downs and, with bold splashes, the zebras and leopards of Africa, after visiting the savannas. But life is better as an adventure shared and in David Ladd she has found her soul mate.

It was Joanna's art that drew them together and Joanna's art that is at the heart of their redecorated home near Devizes. Here we take a look at the artist's rise to fame, her idyllic wedding and stylish home and what will be her most important exhibition to date.

Having studied illustration at art college, Joanna knew her passion lay with painting animals. It didn't take her long to follow her dream when just before graduating from Falmouth College of Art and Design in 1991, she started illustrating wildlife books. Ten years on and Joanna felt she was always working to someone else's brief and not fulfilling her longing to create something special of her own.

In 2000 Joanna finished a painting of an eagle owl and although she was reluctant to sell her first piece she wanted to find the best way of establishing her name within the art world. Joanna went in search of advice on the best way to sell prints of her paintings, which led her to a small gallery hidden just off High Street in the market town of Marlborough. "Andy Le

Poidervin was the proprietor at that time," recalls Joanna. "He said: 'I really needed an outlet and it just so happened that he was about to retire so offered me the gallery.'"

It was a huge gamble to invest in her own gallery without knowing how her work would be received, but within the first week her gamble paid off when the eagle owl original sold for £1,500. This gave her the encouragement to proceed with her next pieces. *A Moment In Time* was the second painting she completed and it put her name in lights.

"I didn't realise how popular the hares would be, especially in this area. With their prominence around the Marlborough downs they really captured the hearts of the people who have become some of my closest clients," says Joanna. The iconic painting of boxing hares, although only her second piece, sold almost instantly to her business adviser for a bargain price; he knocked her down from £1,500. But, with the prints flying out of the gallery door, she could easily have sold the original for its full price.

"It soon became clear to me that people did not just want a print, they wanted originals, so I started commissions of hares. I studied them endlessly, observing them for hours at a time," remembers Joanna. She discovered many mystical stories behind the hare which helped to expand the series, creating a handful of paintings set against a dream-like night sky. They were a goldmine and really underpinned the business, giving her name the recognition it deserved among art critics.

Just a few years later, in 2006, Joanna was asked to appear on a pilot TV show to talk about the hare and her paintings; the show was called *Springwatch*. This launched her career at a much higher level, building relationships with people



who would play a big part in her exhibitions to come.

A couple of years before this, in 2004, she was also influenced by an artist who was painting large scale Pop Art-style work, just on plain canvas, and selling them at Christie's through a cancer research charity, Art for Life. "I painted a dramatic 6ft canvas of a mother and baby zebra, *Zee and Little Zee*. The contrast of colour and taking pattern to the edge of the canvas was something I had never tried before, but it has the most fabulous effect and doing this for charity was wonderful," the artist says.

The painting was auctioned off, fetching the highest price for an original that evening at Christie's, and although the painting was given away, the PR from that one night in London was priceless. From this she sold the second painting for £5,000 and when the client came to see the canvas he fell in love with the third, which Joanna was still working on, and purchased them both for a whopping £9,500.

Joanna found a new drive from this charity auction, raising awareness and money through her art for charities, which has in turn taken her on several trips to Africa, studying animals in their natural environment.

These trips helped to produce nine paintings for a show in London in 2005, opened by Mike Read, the former DJ. She raised money for the Gerald Durrell charity, selling two-thirds of the collection throughout the two weeks.

The point was to create something completely different. "I wanted to do something new with pattern and started to incorporate the influence of interiors into my work and

Far left: Warm tones make the lounge the perfect foil for Joanna's art; Left: Striking black, white and red; Above: Joanna's wedding day



Art of romance



how they sit within a room. They were much more dramatic; the large scale canvases with the strong contrasting colours really bring me such enjoyment," says Joanna.

These new pieces took her work far and wide, introducing her to Raymond Blanc and Le Manoir, where six commissioned paintings are displayed in the Lemongrass and Sandalwood suites, inspired by Malaysia and Africa respectively.

In 2010, the Year of the Tiger, she sold a tiger painting for £15,000 at her exhibition on the tiger, raising money for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and taking her on a journey to the Isle of Wight where she met Charlotte Corney, the daughter of Jack Corney, a great conservationist who set up the zoo to protect the tiger.

Her work also led her to meet her husband David. "He was a client of mine when I was still in my first gallery; he loved my work and we just hit it off. We have been together now for two years," says Joanna with a smile.

Over the past year they have been creating their home together. "David already owned the house but we wanted to transform it into a wonderful light, open space," she explains. David had already done the hard work of renovating the house from the traditional chapel conversion it was to something much more contemporary.

"He opened it up and added the conservatory space. Since then we have really worked on lighting; it is so important to us and my work to have the right lighting within our home, and the right colours throughout," she explains. They used colours that are very much in fashion and hues that create the perfect backdrop for her dramatic paintings, with accent tones to complement each room.

"My studio is my favourite room in the house. It is spectacular at all times of the day whatever the weather. Since there are windows on both sides of the room – one facing east, the other west – I see the sun rise across the fields in the morning and setting in the evening. I find so much inspiration from the misty mornings as it hangs above the countryside around us," says Joanna.

The garden flows from the house and was the perfect setting for their wedding at the end of July, when they spent a magical day among friends and family. "I had planned to have a nice relaxing week in the run up to the big day but as so often happens this was not to be. There was so much to do and on the morning of the wedding I was still deadheading flowers in the garden with my bridesmaids, sister and hairdresser in tow!" Joanna laughs.

The wedding took them just five months to plan. They worked together on everything even the dress: "There was only one person who I wanted to love the dress as much as me, so David came with my best friend to the fittings

and helped decide on the one," remembers Joanna. The dress was a Pronovias design found at Harrods and as with her work and their home the styling of the wedding was just as important, with a vintage tea, clean Art Deco lines and a Latin feel to the day.

"The flowers were from Ammi in Devizes. I wanted red roses as David proposed in Venice on Valentine's Day!"

It all went pretty smoothly for them; even Joanna would say she handled it all very well, even on the morning when she came down to find the cake had collapsed! "I saw the funny side of it actually; at that stage there is really nothing else to do but laugh!" she says.

‘Joanna has promised to raise £6,000 for the zoo’

Joanna and David's two-week honeymoon to St Lucia gave them time to wind down from the excitement, before jumping straight back to reality and Joanna's upcoming show.

Joanna met Charlotte Corney on a trip to the Isle of Wight Zoo to study tigers at their sanctuary: "The work they do is really quite inspiring, taking care of such magnificent creatures and educating people on their conservation," explains Joanna. Having also met Charlotte's partner Chris Packham when he came to her last show on the tiger in November 2010, Joanna was keen to help them raise awareness for their work at the zoo.

In October Joanna will be opening her home to clients for a show of paintings of tigers, white lions, zebras, leopards and other wild animals, raising a promised £6,000 for the excellent work at the Isle of Wight Zoo.

It will also be a chance for people to view her latest works of the leopard and other wildlife, capturing the animals' innate essence and power. Some of these magnificent images have a twist of using more vibrant pinks, greens and mauves and are exclusive one-offs.

"I feel my work offers a totally different view on wildlife, with unusual compositions and really captures my love of wildlife and the beauty within it through a contrasting modern perspective. The eyes are the windows of the soul, with every expression offering a different story. I hope I can pass this magic onto my clients through my work." **WL**

• Readers are invited to visit Joanna's home for the private view with Chris Packham on October 9 or the exhibition on October 15 and 16, which also features wirework figures by Rachel Ducker and glass by LoCo Glass. Telephone 01672 519277 for an invitation, email joanna@joannamay.com, or visit www.joannamay.com. The Joanna May Studio Gallery is at 2-3 Hughenden Yard, High Street, Marlborough.

Top: A lion painting, yet to be hung in the hall
Centre: A new departure – vivid colour
Bottom: The boxing hares are one of Joanna's enduring and most popular images