

ARTS NEWS & REVIEWS

Company's act of enlightenment



■ Abacus Group financial director Peter Griffith-Jones, chief executive Martin Kent and marketing manager Jilly Oxlade in the boardroom where Maureen Riley's work finds satisfying space

UNLESS you are an electronics anorak, the chances are that if I spoke to you of passives, peripherals, mech components and batteries, your eyes would soon glaze over – right?

You would also suspect that a visit to the former Newbury warehouse of a leading regional distributor of electronics components, Abacus Group plc, was hardly going to be an inspiring experience.

How wrong can you be? This company which made £174 million last year has taken a brave initiative and ploughed several noughts of it back into the community by purchasing 57 works by nine local artists, together with some "funky" sculpture by London artist Tessa Eastman, to lift the walls and improve the working environment of 100 workers at their refurbished HQ in Bone Lane. That's about as good as it gets, I'd say.

Last week, at a Pimms reception attended by mayor of Newbury, Mike Rodger, the company's chief executive Martin Kent welcomed artists to the 'unveiling' of their paintings and photographs in situ. "We have 27 years association with Newbury," he said, "and it's only appropriate that we should support the work of local artists."

"We intend to buy further pieces from time to time to add to our collection and we'll also be encouraging our staff to purchase any pieces they wish after they have been on display for a few months."

Only three months into the post and with an Open Studios brochure in hand, marketing manager Jilly Oxlade had the enviable task of visiting studios with financial director Peter Griffith-Jones and an open brief to select work for the various spaces – reception, meeting rooms, corridors, stairwells, board room, canteen and rest areas.

The ceilings are low in this warehouse conversion and the walls need life, so most of

the works, a majority of which are abstract, have been chosen on the basis of colour and texture.

Abacus hasn't blindly bought from an art for offices catalogue, nor by the metre. Time and thought has gone in to matching work to the space, mostly successful, occasionally less so, but, in a couple of months the works will be moved around to keep it fresh, to be viewed from another perspective.

In the reception, for instance, where visitors are likely to loiter, what seem at first glance to be watercolour sketches, on closer inspection turn out to be Pam Gover's richly-stitched scenes.

In the busy canteen, with its pool tables and wide-screen TV, John Perkins' paintings of people and places are appropriately accessible and familiar.

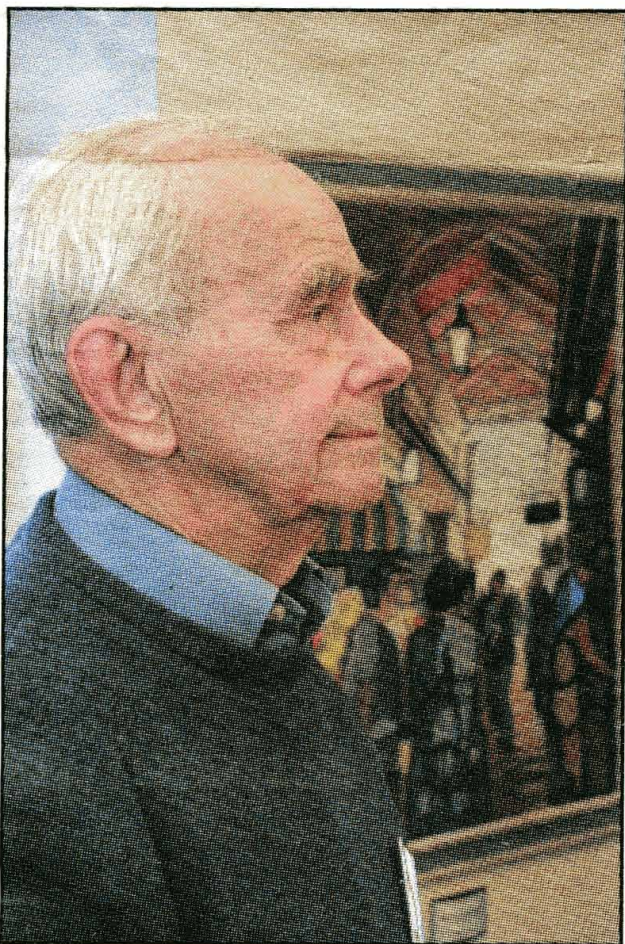
In other spaces, Jane Body's bold flower photography, Nigel Moores whose work uses colour and form, Tory Lawrence's rich oil studies of animals, the light and shade of Pam Grayburn's continental watercolours, Suzanne Caster's emotive textural forms and Sandy Kendall's free brush strokes, all bring a new dimension.

Particularly pleasing is a well-placed series of large-scale pastel abstracts by Maureen Riley, which add a calming atmosphere to the boardroom.

First reactions from the staff has been mixed but, as Jilly Oxlade says: "If each employee likes the work of just one artist, that's 10 per cent of the total work we have on display. Mission accomplished."

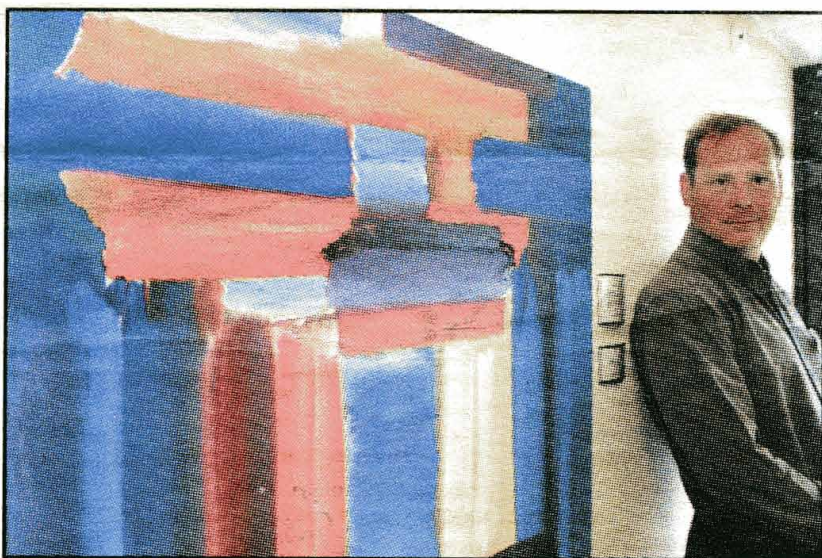
The next step will be to commission new work – a process already underway, as textile artists are being sourced to create hangings for a 'quiet' room, where laptops and leather bucket seats prevail, but phones are banned, and the sound-proofed ceiling causes whispers to bounce around the walls.

Oh, that more of Newbury's big name companies were this enlightened.



■ Newbury artist John Perkin's style is figurative but also employs abstraction

Ref: 24-7883B



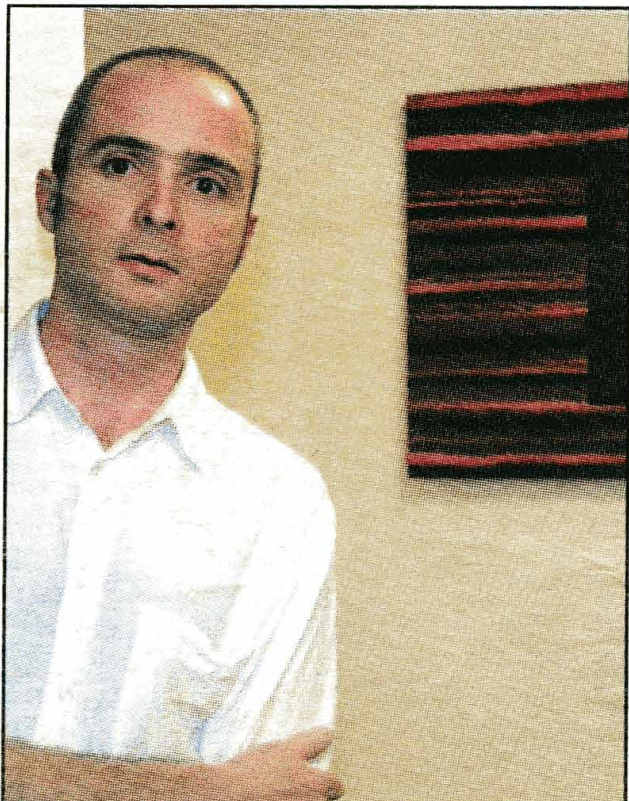
■ Bold lines from Hartley Witney painter Nigel Moores

Ref: 24-7883G



■ Sandy Kendall, from Basingstoke, has a freedom of style

Ref: 24-7883I



■ Tom Cartmill, works with visual perception from his studio at The Old Fire Station in Mortimer

Ref: 24-7883N



■ Thatcham painter Suzanne Caster

Ref: 24-7883N

■ Pick up a free Open Studios brochure at The Corn Exchange, Tourist Office or library, and use it to visit artists in their studios until June 13. The taster exhibition *Insight 2004* runs concurrently at New Greenham Arts, 10am to 4pm daily