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The art insider

Ruthie Collins

December is here, sparkling with relentless good cheer – an overflowing ‘cup o’ kindness’ as Robert Burns would have it. But that doesn’t have to mean trawling all the private views or parties you can in search of free mince pies and mulled wine. Radical as this may sound, you could be kind to yourself and diarise time to reflect, make art or engage with culture in a meaningful way, during this silly season.

It could be something as simple as sneaking a read of those Christmas books you are stockpiling for friends and family. Top of my list this Christmas is psychological thriller *Dear Amy* by Helen Callaghan, who studied at Cambridge and now lives here. Novels set in Cambridge are perfect presents for fans of the city – crime fans will love *For the Sake of Elena* by US writer Elizabeth George, also set in Cambridge, not to mention James Runcie’s *Grantchester Mysteries*. “We are all the products of our landscape; the landscape of our imaginations just as much as the physical landscape we live in,” says Helen, of how Cambridge as a city influenced characterisation in *Dear Amy*.

Sense of place and how artists respond to it in their work is the theme that shapes the exhibition *Portraits of Place*, one of several across the city celebrating 50 years of Kettle’s Yard as part of the University of Cambridge. It’s held at the Heong Gallery, one of the newest art spaces in the city which has quickly become a firm fixture on our cultural circuit. Dash in to avoid the crowds for a bit of self-kindness and



sumptuous reflection. Watch out for the stunning works of fisherman turned naïve artist, Alfred Wallis.

But perhaps the best way to make sure you stay chilled this month, while dosing up on your fix of art – is by checking into the Art of Float, opposite Stir café, who are co-hosting a Christmas Market as part of Mitcham’s and Merrier, on 10 December. The event builds on last year’s success, a sprinkling of fabulousness that extends all the way round to the Boathouse pub, too, where you can find food trucks, artists and makers – plus Christmas trees! With a grand lights switch-on at 3pm, plus a candlelit meditation at new yoga centre

Satyam Yoga, Art of Float will also host poetry from Hammer & Tongue and the Cambridge Poets Society. Well done, co-ordinator Polly – a powerhouse of passion and community spirit.

Though buying from independents is something many of us love, the bland commercialism of Christmas isn’t. So slowing down and making something creative outdoors as a family is a great alternative. Making mixed-media Christmas cards out of paint, festive glitter and wrapping paper with my boy is one of my fave activities – we make time for it each year and absolutely love it! So why not check out Enchanted Days at Milton Country Park, also on 10 December from CIC Gap Learning. Children can make a Christmas craft in the Narnia-themed Wild Place, plus there’s a visit from Santa. “It is exciting to run Enchanted Days over the

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Left Santa will be visiting Milton Country Park at *Enchanted Days*. Above and right Naomi Davies' warm-hearted Cambridge-focused cards are available from various locations around the city.

Christmas period as we will be making memories and sharing our Yuletide promises to loved ones moving away from the commercial aspects of Christmas," says Amanda, one of two sisters that runs GAP Learning. Expect magical characters and the chance to create something special together – but wrap up warm, as you will be outside. See the Milton Country Park website for more info.

Cambridge Junction's Christmas show, *Beauty and the Beast*, produced by the fantastic New International Encounter also brims with magic and a fairy tale forest. With a compelling, gutsy heroine, this is the perfect show to take the kids to. Cambridge Junction's family arts programming is some of the best you will

find and their Christmas shows are brilliant, catering to the more adventurous parent without being so 'out there' that the kids just don't get it at all (I've not been to a show that my small boy hasn't adored). Forest lovers can also try creating a gorgeous wreath with foraged foliage and flowers with Anna's Flower Farm, whose bespoke workshops are another fabulous way to slow down. As art critic and founder of Cambridge School of Art John Ruskin once said, 'flowers seem intended for the solace of ordinary humanity'. Check annataylorflowers.wordpress.com for all the details.

Finally, card lovers should snap up gorgeous finds from Mandy Knapp, who is selling her own hand-printed range exclusively in Bridges on Bridge Street – a

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clean, contemporary array of vibrant prints (I love her rowing-inspired oars design!). Plus Naomi Davies' work has fast become a hit with many in the city – her utterly divine cards are available in Primavera, Linton Kitchen and many more independents. They're warm-hearted pieces that capture the spirit of Cambridge; what's not to love? Happy festivities all. ✕

