

FINANCIAL TIMES

# HOW TO SPEND IT

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# Fantastic BEASTS

Folk-mask artist Alex Merry and filmmaker Martha Fiennes share a friendship based on a love for weird and wonderful projects, says *Lucie Muir*

PORTRAITS BY JON TONKS

Alex's work is totally animalistic. Just look at the way her headpieces come alive when she puts them on," says Martha Fiennes, revelling in the theatricality of Alex Merry's papier-mâché "beasts". Quick as a flash, Merry dons a monkey mask and lunges forward, becoming almost simian herself. Merry even talks about her creations as if they were living beings, says Fiennes. "When we discussed transporting the beasts from her Stroud studio to London, Alex said, 'Oh, they would love that – they do like a day out.'"

The handcrafted folk masks – not just the monkey, but also a sheep, a goat and a bulbous doll's head – were London-bound to feature in Fiennes' ethereal 2018 moving-image artwork *Yugen*. Made with the latest in AI technology, it is a perpetually self-generating piece of art, featuring Salma Hayek Pinault. In one scene, the actress reclines on a throne, resplendent in a corseted red dress and a crown of mushrooms, as the beasts slowly levitate at her feet.

"I love *Yugen's* otherworldly quality. The viewer is transported to another reality," says Merry, who first came to Fiennes' attention in 2015 by way of a mutual Gloucestershire connection, artist Colin Glen. When the painter heard that Fiennes was looking to stage a 50th-birthday Burning Man ceremony for her brother, the composer Magnus Fiennes, he mentioned Merry – a trained illustrator who had become interested in the origins of 15th-century English Morris dancing and mask-making traditions while working as a photorealist painter for Damien Hirst. Having taken Morris-dancing classes with the English Folk Dance and Song Society in Camden, Merry later met master-ceremonial mask-maker Stephen Rowley, and fashioned her first processional folk headdress, a sheep called Ewegenie, in 2014. Framed in a bushy mane of locally spun wool, it is one of the most popular – and least frightening – beasts in the pack, and is still going strong today.

For the Fiennes party, Merry constructed a 4m-tall pagan-inspired wicker man from foraged kindling and other woodland matter, complete with a large phallus whittled from a branch. It took several days to build in the grounds of Arts & Crafts house Hilles (belonging to Fiennes' partner, the former barrister and art dealer Detmar Blow), in the Slad Valley. On the night, two local Morris-dancing groups – Merry's all-female troupe Boss Morris and Styx of Stroud – brought a cacophony of drums, pipes and old English folk songs to the proceedings.

"Of course, we renamed the 'Burning Man' 'Burning Mag', in Magnus's honour," says Fiennes, whose other famous siblings include the actors Ralph and Joseph,

and documentary filmmaker Sophie. Martha directed Ralph in the 1999 Russian period drama *Onegin*, while Magnus provided its score. He also created the haunting soundtrack to Fiennes' first moving-image artwork, *Nativity* (2011), and, most recently, *Yugen*.

"Not long after the Burning Mag, Martha called to ask if I would lend my masks to *Yugen*," recalls Merry. "During that initial conversation, we discussed shamans, extraterrestrials, hidden portals into other worlds and the surrealist paintings of Leonora Carrington. Funnily enough, I had a book by that very artist already open on my desk."

Their creative alignment is more than mere coincidence, according to Fiennes. "That level of intuition filters into lots of places; it goes into quantum physics, crop circles, metaphysics, esotericism," she says. "I am drawn increasingly to an expanded science of consciousness. Alex's beasts are representations of consciousness, aligning to archetypes. They defy acceptance into a 'logical' world, which might regard them as a bit of pseudo-pagan fun, but for me, they trigger much deeper resonances."

She brings this into play in *Yugen* by combining coding instructions with a database of original imagery and pre-recorded sound, enabling video and audio layers to be selected at random and in real time. Algorithms – or "enchanted imagery", as she prefers to call them – present the viewer with a seamless visual narrative without end.

This high-tech approach throws Merry's handmade masks – sculpted from papier-mâché-coated bubble wrap – into sharp relief. "The beasts are not perfect by any means," says Merry. "I also like that they don't always last, which means I will have to make them again. That they can be made from everyday objects is another plus," she adds, pointing to a pair of scrubbing brushes that double as lips on a quirky "basket man" head.

Each one takes around a week to make, with prices on request, and Merry can also be commissioned to create whimsical portraits (from £950) of people and pets, with the same folksy look. It was these works that caught the eye of the Gucci creative team in 2017. She has since created illustrations of the Gucci Décor and DIY ranges, as well as the Zumi bag, which have been used across the brand's social-media campaigns. Last year, she painted a series of tarot-esque murals for the Gucci Garden headquarters in Florence, and can be seen on Instagram dancing up and down its corridors in full Morris garb.

Gucci provides another synchronicity between the two women. Following the premiere of *Yugen* at the Palazzo

ALEX MERRY'S  
PET PORTRAIT  
OF SCOUT



Far left and below:  
Alex Merry and Martha  
Fiennes in Stroud,  
Gloucestershire, with  
some of Merry's  
beasts. Left: the  
all-female Morris-  
dancing troupe  
Boss Morris. Above:  
a Merry illustration  
for Gucci Décor

Grazzi during the Venice Film Festival in 2018, the fashion house supported screenings at London's Serpentine Gallery, in Los Angeles (which is adding the artwork to its collection) and Christie's New York, where the film opened the Art + Tech Summit in June 2019. "My work is certainly collectable," says Fiennes, who deals with commissions directly. "It can be watched on any format, from your smartphone to a large LED screen, though the gallery setting provides the best sensory experience."

At the moment, Fiennes is working on an idea for her next moving-image artwork. "And I am definitely going to be working with Alex on that," she says. "She has all the right energy to take things to the next level." ■ HTSI  
[yugen.art.alexmerryart.com](http://yugen.art.alexmerryart.com)

## WE TALKED ABOUT SHAMANS, HIDDEN PORTALS AND SURREALIST PAINTINGS

