

Tamsin Abbott: Painting with Light

In a delightful and, for the AMA, unusual talk, Tamsin Abbott described her journey into her current practice as an artist, illustrator, and maker in stained glass. A childhood spent in urban Liverpool left Tamsin feeling trapped and out of place. Her heart was in the countryside, and she revelled in the freedom of family camping holidays on the Isle of Arran. Childhood reading included books such as Orlando [the cat]; the gentle stories of 'BB', with their tales of nature, and their scraperboard illustrations; and books on wildlife and folklore. These fed her imagination and have provided a lasting treasure trove of memory on which she still draws. She at last achieved her childhood dream when she went to Stirling University, eventually specialising in Medieval Literature. She came out with a firstclass degree, but equally important for her future life was the experience of living, whilst a student, in a relatively remote farmhouse with spectacular countryside views. Tamsin had done Alevel art and continued to draw. Her reading for her course included illustrated reference books which played on her love of myth and legend; but their pictures of stained glass did not, as yet, strike a chord.



With a move to Herefordshire via Cumbria, and marriage to Mike, a craftsman in wood, Tamsin finally found the self that had always been within. Once their children were old enough, she started to explore her own creativity, with a foundation course at Gloucester College of Art and, at the suggestion of a friend, an evening course in stained glass. She did not like the cold, splintery feel of the glass, yet continued for four years as she came to realise its potential. Husband Mike provided Tamsin with a magical green oak, wattle and daub studio that blurs the divide between inside and out.

Tamsin's work is highly individual, although she has drawn inspiration and affirmation from the very different work of Thomas Denny, whose glass translates ancient religious images into shimmering and unmistakably modern idioms. Walking in the landscape, Tamsin starts to see trees, birds, animals, and other flora and fauna in terms of her work in stained glass. Much of her work is small scale, although she has been commissioned to do large pieces, including a window for a local hospital. Her work is technically demanding, requiring a deep understanding of the properties of glass and of glazes. She uses, for preference, mouthblown handmade glass from English Antique Glass, now the only traditional manufacturers in the country, although she also uses glass from Poland and Germany, and limited amounts of machine made glass. Each glass has its own characteristics, tactile as well as in its properties of colour and light. Samples were handed round. Because Tamsin has internalised so much of her visual sources, the detail recorded in preparatory drawings varies. Once she has established her basic composition, however, her work always begins with a full sized cartoon, a line drawing done with a broad pen that allows for the width of the lead sections or comes that will hold the glass in place. The expensive glass is chosen for colour, and cut to shape. Tamsin can then begin to paint. Some pieces are left untreated as they came from the supplier. Others are covered with a thick black glaze that includes metal oxides and powdered glass. Since this is opaque, Tamsin cuts templates following her drawn shapes to help establish her drawing.

Tamsin Abbott: Continued



Boxing Hares

She then uses varied tools, such as wooden skewers and brushes, to remove the glaze and reveal the glass beneath, very much like working in the negative lights and darks of scraperboard. Once Tamsin has completed her drawing, and made sure that it reads across the whole composition of glass fragments, stray paint dust is removed, and the pieces fired in a kiln. An alternative way of working is to use 'flash glass' – clear glass sandwiched between layers of colour. Tamsin has tried acid etching, but this is very unsafe, and she now uses a Dremel tool to engrave into the glass, biting through the colour, with tonal variation coming through the depth of cut. This, too, demands great skill. Anyone who has ever used a Dremel will know that the tool tends to have a mind of its own. Both processes may be used in individual elements that come together to form a single piece. When all the work is ready, the glass is jigsawed into place, again with the cartoon as a guide, and leaded up. The process may require minor adjustments to the shape of the glass. Leading is followed by soldering the joints. Cement is forced between the lead came and the glass and the lead closed up, and then there is a final cleaning up. Tamsin sees her work as giving the glass a life, and then

allowing it, through the interplay of light, to have a life of its own. Hares, foxes, ravens, owls, poultry, horses, even otters, dance, gambol, relax or dream in an imagined landscape whose elements are drawn from acute observation of nature.

For commissioned work, she adheres more closely to an actual scene, highlighting and interpreting vistas and details in close consultation with the wishes of her clients. Once, she strayed from her brief – only to find that her patron had a paranoid fear of mice. It was a lesson well and hardily learned.

Tamsin triumphed over some computer technology that was having a bad hair day to show some ravishing images, and on the day probably earned herself another commission for a stained glass piece. It was a talk that came from the heart. Her work pays homage to the beauty of nature, to the alchemical nature of glass, and to what she calls the 'invisible tapestry' of myth, fairy tales, and ancient connections to the landscape that link us to our rural past.

Margaret Condon

Visit to the Studio/Shop of Rachel David, "Textile Anarchist"

Rachel David's studio/shop, on Park Street, Leamington, is a treasure trove of colour, texture and exotica: flamboyant coats, outsize hats, gorgeous knitwear and socks to turn heads, not to mention the fashionably attired rabbits, passementerie, jewellery and felted goods. It was this richly decorated and warmly hued environment, together with Rachel herself, which welcomed a party of members and friends on a Thursday evening in May. Once wine glasses had been generously filled, Rachel began with a summary of "the first 54 years" of her life.



Like many others of their generation, Rachel's mother and grandmothers had sewn, mended and reused clothing and this, combined with a childhood fascination with jumble sale finds of Victorian costume and visits to Liberty's, formed the foundations of her later work.

Despite her obvious creativity and, in a story all too common at the time, she was steered towards learning to type and finding a suitable man.

Rachel David: Continued

The compromise was a course in business studies and a job in an advertising agency. It wasn't long before Rachel's youthful excesses brought this to a close and she went off to North Wales to become a hermit! As she freely admits, she wasn't quite cut out for this either, getting married, having three children and then getting divorced over the next few years. By necessity, she then did a succession of odd jobs, but also started to make quilts and related items to sell. She also worked with a women's community art group, where they produced works using recycled teabags, emptied, washed and ironed!

At this point she found a new husband (made herself wedding dress out of a recycled mantilla) and gained two stepchildren. The time had come to give up the assortment of "day jobs" and focus on her creative textile work and so began a period of selling through festivals and fairs. One of the first was a stall at the Leamington Peace Festival, where she sold out! Soon she was at Glastonbury, an exhausting but rewarding eight day event, where she won the Green Trader of the Year award. Further recognition included winning a competition for wearable art, judged by Grayson Perry and seeing her clothing being worn by public figures. But all the packing, unpacking, travelling and working out doors was enormously hard work and an occasion when her collection froze (literally) was the final straw and the idea of having a shop was born.

Rachel has now been in Park Street for 18 months and "it's working". However the need to keep up a supply of fresh stock, spend time with customers and with the people who are "just looking", deal with suppliers of gift items and cover the much higher overheads, means that she works long hours and is trying to find the right balance between bought-in items, regular stock and high end individual pieces.

She buys preowned garments, from a range of sources, collects fabrics and trimmings and then begins to work towards a new, wearable creation. Sometimes, she has a vision for a garment and other times, it just progresses and happens. Loving decoration, the key is often knowing when to stop. Rachel is currently making six coats for a high end exhibition, "Fresh Air Sculpture" at Quenington, Cirencester. The look is "lady gardener" of the 1920's, an abundance of flowers and large, wide brimmed hats. We saw a sumptuous coat, almost upholstery like, in pinks and floral velvet, another in cream with pastel trimmings and one, a work in progress, with applique red flowers.

I think we were all so fascinated by the story, the creativity and the results that we only got down to the technical at the last moment. Reusing old fabrics and recycling garments is something which needs to be done with care. Materials approaching their disintegration date, need to be avoided and vintage wear is frequently too small for today's more generous physiques. Dyeing of trimmings and fabrics is done either with Procion dyes or with the familiar Dylon range and Rachel's many sewing machines form a collection in their own right. But all talks must come to an end, and, sitting at the back, I had been able to observe heads turning towards garments, knickknacks and accessories. We were inspired and wanted to take away a memento of the evening and many did!

Katharine Barker

Images: Rachel David: Sharon Luke models a mask – at least we think it's Sharon!

a stunning embroidered black lace

