



Audio Podcast Text



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Presenter Peter Nash tours the h.Art week throughout the county of Herefordshire, exploring the arts and crafts of this extraordinary festival...

Welcome to this feature on the 2010 h.Art festival. Firstly, Amanda Fitzwilliam, co-ordinator of the 2010 festival, explains what it's all about: "Hereford Art Week exists to give artists in Herefordshire a showcase. The creative industries are one of the strengths of Herefordshire. There's lots of artists beavering away out there on their own. By having h.Art week we make a platform for them to shout louder. For a week we celebrate the whole range of work that's going on in the county. This year we have 111 locations all around the county. We go right up to all the borders of Herefordshire. All the little country lanes, people will see these pink arrows in hedgerows that say h.Art. So you see a pink sign with an arrow, if you follow it, you'll find an artist at the end. Needless to say, because of the county we're in, a lot of them are in the most spectacular locations. We've ended up on the top of the hills on the Welsh boarder, down in orchards, alongside the river Wye. It's a fantastic excuse to explore the county, see some beautiful things, for people who want a different way of exploring Herefordshire."

In the village of Bromsberrow, on the eastern side of the county, venue 19 is the home of Helen and Gilbert Crawford, a silk artist and a furniture maker. Alongside their own art, they were also playing host to a small collective from the village, including ceramic artist Rachel Padley, metal worker Dave Preston and Jeweller Gemma Farr.

Helen explains what inspires her to make such unusual wall art out of silk:

"I love colour. I'm very much influenced by my visits to Scotland" says Helen. Showing off some of her pieces, she explains "These are all seascapes. Lots of blues, turquoises, greens, purples. I make a basic sheet of paper according to what my design is which I've sketched out in rough, then I build up onto that single sheet with say seagulls or pebbles. Just to enrich the surface, I stitch into it with a sewing machine, add little sparkly bits where necessary, add the waves, the frothy bits and it just builds up into a total picture, which is hopefully expressing some of what I feel about those amazing landscapes."

Also in the front room of the house is some furniture, this is made by Gilbert. Explaining why he doesn't make it at the house, he says "I have a workshop at Staunton. There's no way I could possibly run the machinery and have the space here, it's very messy." Describing one of his pieces, he says "We have here a blanket chest in English Oak with some Walnut details on it. I do have some hidden fixings in there and of course the Walnut disguises that and puts a bit of detail into the design as well." On an object that looks like a very small table, he explains "That goes under the name of a meditation stool. I use that as a foot rest when I'm watching the television."

Though her work is on display in the front room, Helen's work area is upstairs. "It's a little bit more chaotic than usual because we've cleared quite a bit of clutter which I keep downstairs for painting." says Helen. "This little piece here has had the silk fibres embellished onto a sheet of silk paper, so they're not stuck on. It gives that extra bit of texture." Demonstrating with the sewing machine, she explains "Because the needles have hooks on them, they send the silk through to the other side. It's another way of decorating the surface."

Also displaying her work at the Crawford's home was neighbour, Rachel Padley. A ceramic artist, Rachel is one of the many artists displaying at h.Art week who worked at home. "I work in a little tiny shed in my back garden. It's amazing how much you can produce in a little tiny area." says Rachel. "It's messy work but fun, great fun. I've always enjoyed getting dirty." Rachel's work is on display in the Crawford's back garden. "I have a gazebo which we tie down very thoroughly, hope it's waterproof and pray for good weather." Talking about how she produces her work, she says "I have a couple of kilns. I have to biscuit fire each piece, which means that after it's been made, it's dried very thoroughly otherwise it'll explode. Then it's given a first firing to a lower temperature which keeps it porous. It's then glazed, and then it's fired to the top temperature which matures the glaze and matures the clay as well, makes it nice and solid." "I enjoy using glazes, I enjoy using different colours, combining colours as well, getting different effects. I don't use flat colours, I like colours that have texture within them. Some of them have crystals in them so they're really interesting and give an organic look to the surface."

Spread out through the Crawford's garden are pieces by Dave Preston. Dave's pieces are metalwork and most are designed to be attached to walls. Helen says "We have some attached to the trellace. Some of them are strong enough to be hanging basket holders."

There are 5 artists in total displaying at the Crawford's house. "Gemma makes jewellery and she will have a beautiful display in the hall. We're looking forward to having her; it's her first year with us." says Helen.

Jenny Pierce is a willow basket maker, originally from Dublin, who has lived in Herefordshire for more than 20 years. Her baskets are based on traditional Irish styles. She has her own Willow plantation, behind her workshop at her house, in the small village of Canon Frome. She explains the process of growing Willows, before using them to make a variety of baskets. "You coppice it every year, so that it doesn't get branchy and you get the long

narrow lengths that you want. The leaves usually fall between October and February, then you're left with the Willows just standing and you can see all the wonderful different colours. I harvest it generally in January time. I'm cutting them down by hand which can be quite time consuming, not so much the cutting but the sorting of it. Generally it's a big gang work with family and friends. It takes 7 of us an entire weekend to do it." Describing her technique for making baskets, Jenny says "I get 3 sticks, which I split and put 3 sticks through, then you're weaving the Willow around the sticks, gradually opening them to make your base. Then you're sticking a rod of Willow in the side of the basket and you'll bend it up, they make your uprights. Then you'll be weaving around those sticks." "After the Willow is cut, it's left to dry for 3 months, because if you made a whole basket with freshly cut Willow, there's 3 months worth of drying out in it and your basket would shrink and become very loose." Showing off some of her works, Jenny says "That's a Connemara turf basket, it's very popular, I sell lots of those. It's straight sided and cylindrical with 2 handles on the top. It's got a pattern on the lid which is an Irish twist, which is added for strength. It makes a good log basket. Originally they were used to carry the turf in from the fields and also the seaweed off the beaches." "Another style of log basket which is my own style, is an oval shaped basket with a nice spiral up the side. That's very popular as well, I sell a lot of those." "These conical baskets, I call them herb baskets. They're based on a traditional Irish design which I've modified slightly. They were originally used as a calf muzzle. The farmers would have put it on the calf while it was still with its mother, to stop it suckling, while they were trying to wean it. They have a multitude of uses, even in the bathroom, for keeping toothbrushes in." Jenny was exhibiting in her house, along with Sarah Walker, an artist who makes lampshades from plant fibre papers and ordinance survey maps.

Jenny Pickford is an artist blacksmith based in the grounds of Shucknall Court, one of the many magnificent venues for the h.Art festival. Jenny trained at Hereford College of Art and, for the last 7 years, has been making intricate and enormous works of metal, to commission. Talking about one of her works, while sitting on it, she says "It's a bench that I made about a year ago now. I use it at shows, it makes a comfortable seat while you're doing a show." "Most of my pieces are made to be outdoors, but I do some smaller courtyard pieces and a few interior pieces as well. I do quite a range of work." Jenny has a workshop at Shucknall Court full of metal working equipment, most of which is very old. "Over there is my power hammer" says Jenny "It's an ancient machine, probably designed around 100 years ago, probably before electricity even, because it's belt driven, it's a lovely machine." "The fly press has been in workshops for hundreds of years you would imagine and obviously anvils as well. Apart from the grinder, the plasma cutter and the welder, everything is pretty much as it would be 100 years ago." Talking about whether what she does is lucrative, Jenny says "Artists are never meant to be rich are they. We're just lucky because we do what we want to do, so I'm rich in that way."

Every year, Hereford Museum and Art Gallery hosts a special h.Art showcase. The 51 artists exhibiting in the gallery, are chosen by a panel of judges. Amanda Fitzwilliam, co-ordinator of the 2010 h.Art festival, explains more:

“Every year we have an open exhibition. Anyone can enter, whether or not they’re opening their studio. We’ve got lots and lots of people this year who’ve not submitted work before. We changed the way in which people could enter for this exhibition. They didn’t have to join the event, they could simply enter 1, 2 or 3 works for this exhibition. We’re showing the works of 51 different artists here, the most we’ve ever had in the open exhibition. You name it, we’ve probably just about got it.” As she oversees the work going up in the gallery, she says “We had 185 works submitted, we had a judging panel who’ve selected 85 works in total. We’ve started to lay them out to try to make some decisions about what works next to what. A lot of the artists have only got 1 work in this exhibition, others have 2 or 3, so we’re trying to make something that sets each work off to its best advantage and gives the visitors a really varied experience within the gallery.”

Pete McKenzie has been hanging the work in the open exhibition for the past few years. He explains “For security the Museum and Art Gallery require mirror plates so that the pictures are permanently fixed to the wall and can’t just be lifted off. We drill directly into the wall using security screws. The measuring and the spacing is the thing that takes the time. We go round trying to balance the works visually, then it’s a question of me going round doing the actual setting of them. We do hope that we’ve got it right before we screw them into the wall, but occasionally you think ‘it’s got to go up a little bit’ so there’s a little bit of painting and filling to be done.” At the end of the exhibition, all the work has to come down again. Pete says “Coming down at the end is actually remarkably quick compared to the setting out and putting up. That’s always quite an enjoyable day because you see the work in a different way as you bring it down.”

Blue-Ginger is an art and craft centre on the Worcester to Hereford road. It’s proprietor is Sue Lim. Talking about why she set the venue up, Sue explains “Blue-Ginger is in an old converted barn behind my home, which is an old Tudor hop farm. I realised that I knew quite a lot of arty crafty people and I was doing a little bit of potting myself. It’s worked very well because it’s drawn in other people that I know and I’ve got to know lots of people in the area.” Talking about h.Art week, Sue says “On an occasion like h.Art we’re able to invite demonstrating artists in. All the artists that come in, we have different people in every day, they all have their work in Blue-Ginger normally, but it’s a great opportunity for them to come along and meet some of our visitors.”

Outside, in the courtyard of Blue-Ginger, are several demonstrations. One of these is Neil, who is a potter. He demonstrates how he makes a pot, from a square of stoneware clay, using a potter’s wheel. He explains how the clay will be fired twice. “I biscuit fire it first, at 1000 degrees. Then the second firing, because it’s stoneware, will be up to 1300 degrees. It then comes out all finished, shiny and blue-ish in colour.”

Another demonstration at Blue-Ginger is from Lynne Fox, whose jewellery is called Silver Fox. Lynne explains some of the equipment she uses to make her silver jewellery, including a slow cooker. “The slow cooker is a pickling device. When the silver is heated, it oxidises, so you put it in there to get rid of

the oxidisation. Then you take it out, give it a scrub, rinse it, then you put it in the barreller, which polishes it so it comes out all shiny. That's the best bit, when they come out shiny."

Marie-Thérèse King makes batiks, which consist of melted wax and dye on cotton or paper. Marie explains "It's a resist technique building up layers of fantastic coloured dyes and wax." She says "I concentrate on making detailed batiks inspired by wildlife, flowers and generally the countryside round here." "I use a mixture of bee's wax and paraffin wax. The first application of the wax will give you white, so your highlights or your outlines. Then you start with your palest colours. So you paint a pale colour on, then once that's dried you paint more wax on to protect that colour and so on and so forth until the last colour you put on. The last colour will be black if you're using black, or a dark colour. The end of the process is ironing off all the wax to get rid of it, then mounting them up and framing them." The benefits of h.Art week are clear to Marie, she says "It's been lovely talking to people about the process. It's not an easy process to understand. But the more people that understand it, the more people want to buy it."

Here's a small selection of views from some of the members of the public at Blue-Ginger, who visited h.Art week in 2010:

"We've been throughout the county now, this is our 4th day of travelling around. We've been right across Herefordshire and seen a great variety of crafts and art."

"We've just come out from Malvern for a day out, a coffee and to have some lunch. I've been to the Hereford Art Gallery. There's every style of craftwork that you can think of that seems to be available. Even if you just go and look and don't buy, it brings awareness I think."

"We've been going round h.Art since it started several years ago."

"I think it shows that there's such a diverse range of people who are interested in arts and crafts, not only in creating them, but in going round and seeing them and hopefully buying them."

As part of h.Art week, the GreenStage Gallery, based at the Hop Pocket arts centre stages a number of artists' work. One such artist is Beth Richardson. Showing off her work, she says "I've got some acrylic works on canvas, quite simple paintings of chairs, tables and flowers. Lots of pale yellow, pale blue, quite roughly painted domestic interiors with nature creeping in to relate with very everyday objects like baths, chairs and teapots. I've just moved to Portugal to a very wild piece of land so I feel like nature's just encroaching into my work. I've usually got little vases with flowers in the corner tucked away neatly, but they just seem to have exploded over the canvas. I think it must be from being surrounded by such wild landscape in Portugal." Beth explains that she has been involved in h.Art week for a few years, saying "I first exhibited in h.Art in the open exhibition; I think it was 3 years ago, just after I'd finished my degree. Since then I've been exhibiting in h.Art week for the last 2 years."

Caro Sweet lives and works on the border of Herefordshire and Worcestershire. She exhibited in h.Art week 2010, with an exhibition of her sculptures, both inside and out. Talking about the materials she prefers to work with, she says "I tend to work in metal now, mainly in bronze and iron because I just love the alchemy of the material and I love the process. But I will often do little working sketches that I'll fire in clay first of all; they're like the working 3-D ideas." Explaining the whole process of producing a sculpture, Caro says "Normally I would do a series of drawings and sketches and chat with the client so that we have a meeting of minds and I can understand the kind of thing that they're looking for. They then leave me to do my creative bit. I'll then build an armature which is a bit like a skeleton, something quite strong; I'll usually model in clay for that. A silicone mould will then be made that will go off to the foundry. They will initially cast the work in wax, coat it in a ceramic shell, melt the wax out and, into that void, the molten bronze is poured. Then after that it's a case of refining it and choosing the patina, which is the colour for it. When it comes out of the furnace, it's what you would know as bronze coloured, a fairly gold bronze brass colour. But by applying heat and chemicals you can actually do all sorts of things with it. You can get a vast range of colours from blues and greens through to vibrant reds." Describing 2 large busts of Adam and Eve, which are displayed outside, she says "These ones were actually cast in a Portland cement and fibreglass. I like the idea of them being this very pale grey colour, which looks good with all the seasons. They're currently surrounded by greenery at this time of year, but in the winter when all the leaves have gone from the trees and you've just got these very stark browns and greys around them, they also stand out beautifully. I like things to be part of the natural environment. The thing with cements and things that have quite a lot of alkali in them is that it can take a while for that naturalisation process to happen. But if you wait long enough or treat them with something, some people sometimes put a wash of natural yoghurt on them to start the process going, they will eventually get a lovely natural patina and become much more part of the environment." 2010 was the first year that Caro opened her doors and exhibited in h.Art week. She says "I think it's a great showcase for a lot of the wonderful work that goes on, often hidden away because, as artists we're often in our quiet creative space and we've not necessarily got our doors open to the public. I think in terms of showcasing what art is available and what artists really do in the county it's wonderful. It gives people the opportunity to come into a professional working environment once a year and really be in the hub of where it all happens."

Here are some of the views of the other artists featured here, on how they feel h.Art week benefits the visitors and the artists themselves. Also what they think the purpose of the festival is:

"It has many purposes really. The purpose is to increase the profile of Herefordshire, to bring people into Herefordshire to increase tourism, to assist the makers to network, to sell their work, to show their work."

"There's such a wealth of artists hidden away here. It just gives people a chance to go round and meet them and see them, see what they do and where they do it, realise that any cow shed tucked away anywhere could be a studio for someone."

“It’s creating an interest, a re-awakening of something that’s been dormant for quite a while.”

“I think it’s a 2 way process. The artists love having people come to visit them and getting feedback, but we also love giving to people who are interested, opening their eyes to the possibilities of art in general.”

“It’s bringing art to the people basically.”

Finally, here’s what Amanda Fitzwilliam, co-ordinator of h.Art week in 2010, believes the festival means to the artists: “It gives them a focus for their year. A lot of them exhibit in exhibitions, but this is their chance to go much deeper than that, it’s about building relationships. You can ask every kind of question, the most basic questions, artists are happy to talk about why they’ve done what they’ve done and how they’ve done it. I think that’s the fantastic thing, that we’ve been able to take the public on this journey of understanding art and realising that it does make our lives a lot richer.”