

Countdown to Lyme Regis ArtsFest 2011 17<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> September

In a series of interviews, Anthea Simmons uncovers the 'back stories' behind a selection of artists participating in ArtsFest. Here she reveals her own. Anthea's work can be seen right now in the Malthouse and Upstairs galleries until August 17<sup>th</sup>.

### **What is the history of your involvement in the Arts?**

I always drew a lot as a child...always the same thing: the ponies so hopelessly longed for and the glamorous faces of women unlike my scrawny, be-spectacled self! My mother painted birds on stones nicked from Westward Ho beach and my next sister down ( I'm the eldest of six and a vicar's daughter)went to Camborne to do Technical Grapics and is now a photographer. My father has a passion for typography and can draw any number of railway layouts, but he would say himself that he could not draw anything living and make it resemble the original!

Most of my drawing was in 'illegal' places, like my jotter. I did once did a really cruel series of portraits of various teachers at Truro High School which caused much hilarity amongst my classmates. Unfortunately, the jotter was confiscated and I then had to apologise to each of my victims individually....ghastly!

I did Art for 'O' level only really because I was better at it than needlework and we were encouraged to do one or the other ( sexist?!) and then it was full steam ahead on the academic career. After reading English at Oxford , I turned my back on academe and went all out for Mammon. I was one of the first girls to work on the floor of the London Stock Exchange as a jobber and I was spoilt rotten. Treated like a little princess. I learned to drink, swear and make and spend money. I have cut down on the first and...more alarmingly...the third! In my 23 years in the City I did not paint or draw a thing beyond doodles in boring meetings, but I did buy an awful lot of art and that gave me the most enormous pleasure. Even now, when money is tight, I still buy things and I never regret it. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I quit a year after my husband died because I realised that I was working so hard that I did not have time to live at all. I paid someone else to do all the fun stuff..look after my son, ride my horse etc. I decided it was time to see if I could write and then, when Hen and I moved to Colyford ( he's at the grammar) I saw a life class in Seaton advertised in a shop window. I was taught by the marvellous Kat Swann and that started me off. The following summer I went on a really inspirational art course with Christine Allison and discovered that I wanted to paint, paint, paint. A session with portrait painter, Binny Matthews, taught me masses about colour theory and composition . I belong to a mentoring group run by Christine and that has been enormously important in developing my work to a point where I feel I have found my voice ( as I have in poetry and prose). I now have a studio in the garden and paint most days.

I try to make a point of visiting galleries as much as possible. We are lucky to have so many excellent places nearby, Sladers Yard , for example. It always spurs me on to raise my game and try new techniques. I get through industrial quantities of paint and lots of large canvases...hence the concerns about income!

### **What are your main sources of inspiration?**

I am in love with the landscape. Wherever I go round here, I am thinking of paintings to be painted and poems to be written about the beauty all around us. It's such a cliché, I know, but there it is. So, it's a love of the land which drives me and I try to convey that passion in the way I paint...with a lot of energy ( and a lot of paint!). My current 'collection' is all about the trees in my wood. I call them the Dryads and people say they have lots of personality about them. They are definitely other-worldly with an old, maybe dark, energy.

Talking of energy, I get a great energy infusion from Christine. She is an inspirational person and a great teacher. ArtsFest is lucky to have her!

I also love the work of Boo Mallinson and Simon Quadrat, who both show locally. I spend a lot of money on books ( here we go again!), monographs and catalogues. ...everything from Picasso to Ivon Hitchens.

### **Which gallery would you like to be locked up in for the weekend?**

That is a difficult question ( now I appreciate how cruel I am being to my interviewees!). Maybe the Picasso museum at Antibes because it combines fabulous work with an idyllic location. I also love the Peggy Guggenheim in Venice for the same reasons. I would love to own a Rothko or a Pollock. In my dreams.

### **How did you come to be involved in ArtsFest?**

I met artist, Pam Allsop, at that life class in Seaton, back in late 2008. She wanted to exploit my writing skills for the benefit of ArtsFest, doing the PR. I was invited over to Lyme in early 2009 to be 'vetted' by Sally Holman and I trotted up sound so that was it! I've been responsible for the publicity ever since. After doing Christine's art course, I thought I might as well exhibit. I took part in the Art Trail, the lovely show at the Baptist Hall and the 'taster' show at The Mill in 2009 and 2010. This year, I am very lucky to have been lent a space to have an open studio, just opposite Christine, as it happens. There'll be three of us up there..Christine, sculptress Greta Berlin and me! I feel very fortunate to be in such exalted company! I'll probably show the Dryads, though my work may well have moved on again by September. Landscape will still be the driver no matter what.

I also get involved in my capacity as a poet, running workshops and giving readings. This year we've got an event at the Marine Theatre which I am calling

'WordFest '. It will feature the work of local Primary School children in a project sponsored by Rotary and I'll be launching my poetry collection.

**Where would you like to see ArtsFest go from here?**

I really would like it to get more national recognition. It's so much more than a show for local artists. It really does boast some extraordinary events and opportunities to have a go and I would like to see the profile raised significantly. I hope to get coverage in the National Press this year...we should be in the 'What's On' lists in the weekend paper but it's hard to break in. We probably need a visit from a big name....Tracy Emin or Damien Hirst, for example. Sad, but true!

**What do you think will be the highlights of this year's ArtsFest?**

Invidious to single anything out. It's all good. However, I think our use of the Shelters will be really exciting. I would urge everyone to come and hear the young poets..and a very young stand-up, Rex Fisher, at 'WordFest'. My father is giving a talk in the Malthouse on the importance of typography in our lives. I have not heard it, so I'll be going to that for sure! Most of the time, I'll be in 'my' studio ,so I suppose I'll miss quite a lot! What a shame!'