

Countdown to ArtsFest

In a series of articles, Anthea Simmons meets some of the artists and uncovers their fascinating back stories. This week, it is the turn of Brian Matravers, who is showing a selection from a collection of 64 paintings (painted from a beach hut this year) in the Upstairs Gallery in the Town Mill complex until August 17th.

What is the history of your involvement in the Arts?

I drew as a child. I was at a C of E school and I just could not survive the playground. I was allowed to stay in and paint to escape the bullying and Mr Hall, the art teacher, thought I had real talent and put me in for Farnham Arts School. I went there aged 13. I had a fantastic time! I was doing life drawing at 13! Imagine! It was brilliant.

When I left, I went to work for a department store, Army and Navy, in the art department. I'd go and see the window dressers in the morning and they'd tell me what they wanted. I remember one said she wanted four playing cards - Ace, King, Queen and Jack. I was really excited. How long had I got to do them? Two weeks? No! By lunchtime! That's how I learned to work so fast. I painted all sorts...a life size Billy the Kid; a surrealist chair covered in nails, part African Congo, part '30s style. Then I went to an agency, Freeborns in Horsley, model makers and artists. The stuff we did! Amazing! Thunderbirds, murals, backdrops. I was thrown in at the deep end. I did stuff for James Gardner, the Festival of Britain designer. Glass painting, dioramas. I learned so much.

Then I went self-employed and worked above an old antique shop...well, it was a junk shop really. I made lots of stuff for the Science and Geological museums. Models and dioramas. I did the Jurassic Coast, for example...it's still in there. In fact, the Science Museum people came down here a couple of weeks back and got my signature on photos of the work I did there. They were really excited!

Then I got a proper house in Reading, one with a front door in the middle and windows either side and an orchard and everything. I bought it for £21,000 and in five years I'd paid it all off. I worked for TBC in Riseley, right in the countryside, doing work for the Guinness World of Records, sculpting the fattest man, the tallest man, the smallest lady....everything! The hardest was the most tattooed! I made the model in clay - lifesize- then it was cast in fibreglass and then I had to paint it back to real life. I had a lot of those models. I wish I'd kept them but they are all gone now. That's one of my regrets.....They were real portraits - Elvis, people like that. I had to leave them all behind.

I went to Taiwan for two months, doing stuff for the Guinness World of Records. I stayed in a five star hotel in Tai Chung. It was marvellous. I never wanted to come home.

Anyway, then it was hard times. I was saved by a chap I met in a pub. He'd developed this anti graffiti paint and was using it to paint underpasses, only the

blokes doing it hated it! It was two parts epoxy. Horrible stuff. They were charging a fortune to do it and he was complaining so I said I'd do it for a quarter of the price. And that's how I came to paint 34 murals in Bracknell and the kids...the kids just loved them, they'd never seen anything like it. Never seen an artist working. The murals were never damaged or defaced and people felt safe using the underpasses. They are still there now.

And then I came to Lyme. My grandfather was born in Chideock. He always talked about Lyme and I had an uncle, on the Curtis side of the family, who lived in Lyme. I'd always wanted to come here. I wish I'd come years ago. I just love it. I wouldn't be anywhere else. That view when you come down the hill, when you see the bay. There's nothing like it.

What are your artistic influences?

When I was little, I was mad about fairgrounds. Mad about them! I loved them! I drew stuff all the time. Granny saw my drawings and she said 'Brian will be an artist'. I loved the films. I drew the characters. If I saw a western, I drew cowboys, when I saw 'Robin Hood', I drew a knight on horseback. My mum saw it and said 'Who drew this?' and I said 'Me' and she said I was a liar and screwed it up!

As far as artists go, it's Degas for me. He built his own world. He didn't know other artists. He wasn't influenced by them. And those rows of dancers...he did that by layering photographic plates. He's bit like Vermeer...he lived in his own world, too. He painted himself in rich garments he couldn't possibly have afforded to impress the guild! And his wife in that painting..she'd have been 12 ft high if she'd stood up! Vermeer lived with his mother-in-law and 11 children. Where are the pictures of teddies with their eyes hanging out, eh?

But what interests me is composition. I like to build up a picture. I don't really like painting from life...but then I've just spent 8 months painting en plein air...

And if you were allowed to own any work of art and be locked up in any gallery for a weekend, what would you choose?

I'd have anything by Degas and I'd spend the weekend in the National Gallery. When you go in and look through the arches and see that Van Gogh...well, it's just stunning! And then you go into the British Artists' section and it's all as miserable as sin...all grey like the weather! But it's got it all... Or there's the V and A...but I'd need a month in there!

How long have you been involved in ArtsFest?

Five years. I usually show in the Pilot Boat and I've been in Castle Wines for three years. Pat's a great supporter of ArtsFest. He lets me put whatever I like in the window. One year, I put a nude in and a lot of people complained but he

didn't give in to the pressure, because he liked the painting and it's his shop! I'm in Tesco this year, as well.

What are you looking forward to in this year's ArtsFest?

I love the show in the Baptist Church Hall. I love seeing how people's work develops. I mean, look at Paula Youens! Her work is lovely! How does she do it? I did typography at college and I was very interested by it so I'll probably go to the Typography talk....if I remember!