

Countdown to ArtsFest 2011 (17<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> September)

In a series of interviews, Anthea Simmons uncovers some of the fascinating 'back stories' behind a selection of artists participating in ArtsFest.

Greta Berlin is a remarkable artist and woman. I visited her at her studio and workshop ( and wonderful sculpture garden) tucked away down a track on the edge of ancient beech woodland on the way to Wootton Fitzpaine. In common with many artists, she is reticent about her talent and achievement and reluctant to blow her own trumpet.

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

'I was born into it...couldn't escape it. Well, I did for a bit once but that was probably a mistake. My father was an artist and my mother a dancer. I grew up in St Ives and was aware of the artists all around me. When my mother died [Greta had quit school to look after her], I went to live with my father. We barely knew each other. I was sixteen. It wasn't easy. I wanted to go to Art College...I suppose I would have gone to Bournemouth to start off with, but my father vetoed it. Said art colleges killed the creative spirit. He may well have been right but I have been at a disadvantage ever since because I did not get that networking opportunity. Anyway, I ran away from the circus, as it were, and into conventionality. I got married to a farmer's son and went off to Australia. He got agricultural work as we travelled around all over that country and we had a marvellous time. I was always digging up clay and making little pieces. I always did things with my hands. I loved the texture of clay. Loved shaping it.

I left my husband and came back to the UK mainly because of the children's schooling. I joined a ceramics course at Southampton College of Art and was taught by a really volatile, exciting man – Malcolm Pepper. He was the most fabulous teacher and shared so much with us..his secret glazes, how to throw. He taught me the best lesson I have ever learned and one I passed on to my pupils. He was watching me at work and shouted over to me 'Breathe, Greta! Breathe!' He was so right. Get the breathing right and the rest will follow.

I taught ceramics to adults for 20 years at Lymington Community Centre. It allowed me to keep working with clay, my first love. I began to make bigger and bigger stuff and it was good schooling for stone work , which I did for two years in Sway (now the famous Artsway).

My first big commission was for a property developer with a big project in Grosvenor Square, Southampton. He had 'a percentage for arts' and he approached me. He wanted a big statue of Lord Mountbatten, [who had lived nearby and after whom so much is named in the City] . 'Had I done life-size work and how big could I go?' he wanted to know 'Oh,yes!' I replied, blithely ( I had done life-size busts!) ` and I could go as big as a house!' I then spent weeks worrying about it all! I realised that I would have to learn to weld, to make the

armature, so I had lessons from a car mechanic. I was pretty bad at it to begin with! When the cast was taken off the armature, the whole thing collapsed...I was incredibly lucky that it didn't break before.

The same developer gave me other commissions and it was these that really enabled me to move to Dorset. By now, I was working almost entirely in steel, now that I had mastered welding. I still love stone. For example, I love the challenge of working with Polyphant sandstone. Its structure is like weetabix. Make a mistake with the chisel and it will shear off, crumble.

I find it hard to express what my work is about sometimes. It is often intensely emotional. Too emotional for the Establishment. It's more about feelings than intellectual concepts. And I've never networked or been any good at articulating or promoting my work. Someone once said that having not been to art school, I would never make it. 'The work is good enough', he said, 'but you don't stand a chance.' But I am still making work, so there it is! And I have had people be very good to me – Broomhill Sculpture Hotel, for example and I have learned so much from craftsmen and tradesmen who have been so generous with their knowledge.

### **Whom do you admire and whose work inspires you?**

My father, Sven Berlin, was a huge influence, especially in the stone work. And Bernard Leach, whom I knew as a child. Such a sweet man and a great potter. He and Brancusi created the most wonderful shapes.

I admire Epstein's portraits and Gaudier Brzeska's loose work. He believed you should let the chisel marks show and I always felt that about my father's work. Even as a child, I could see that the work was at its best before the marks were refined away. The work should be left as if it is coming out of the stone.

I love folk art from Africa and Peru. And netsuke. Scale isn't everything. A tiny bronze can give intense pleasure just from its weight in your hand. In fact, I think 'Pep' said that the test of a good sculpture is how it looks with no reference points so that you are not influenced by scale. He's right.

### **And if you could be locked up in a gallery for the weekend, where would you choose?**

Zimbabwe's Sculpture Village...but twenty years ago, before it became too Westernised. Wonderful work in stone...unique greens and blacks.

### **What is your involvement in ArtsFest and what are you looking forward to this year?**

I've been involved as an exhibitor since the start. I think it's great when artists get together. I come at it from a slightly different angle because I don't expect to sell, but I love to see the work in a different context and for it to be SEEN by

different people. When I put a piece in a new landscape, it changes and I find that fascinating.

Selling my work is important to me only in as much as a sale enables me to make new work. The money allows me to buy materials and equipment...and that's all I really want now. It's not about fame or money.

This year, I will have pieces at the Town Mill and outside Christine Allison's studio and I will do what I usually do and watch people. I love people-watching. I can do it for hours. And I love it when people touch or pick up my sculptures. One of my happy memories of my Dad was when he came to my studio and would find some piece gathering dust in a corner and stroke it. Whenever he stroked a piece I knew he liked it. He didn't say much but now and then he'd say 'Well done, girl' .'