

Countdown to ArtsFest

In a series of articles, Anthea Simmons discovers the fascinating back stories behind some of the artists participating in this year's ArtsFest (September 17th to 25th). This week she meets photographer and professional seamstress Jillian Hunt from Charmouth. Her work can be seen in Calico and The Happy Cupcake Company during the event.

What is the history of your involvement in the Arts?

I was always drawing as a child. I collected and pressed flowers and then drew them. I suppose I came from quite an artistic family in a way. My father taught music and my mother was a seamstress. One of my sisters was creative, too. I grew up near Basildon in Essex and then my parents moved to Norfolk when I was 16. I did 'A' levels in Fashion and Design and then went to Great Yarmouth School of Art and Design where I studied Textile Design.

I got married quite young and, as an Army wife, was never anywhere long enough to pursue a career. I kept on drawing, though; doing illustrations for greetings cards on a commercial basis.

A few years ago, I suddenly felt that I really needed to deal with the creative urge which was getting stronger and stronger inside me. I picked up an old black and white Zenith camera which my father had given me and started to take some photos. I had done a bit of photography on my foundation course, so I knew a bit and I liked taking pictures because it was a quick way to create something without having to sit with paints for hours and hours. I developed the prints myself. I went to evening school at Woodroffe. They have fabulous facilities and I learned so much about light, shutter speeds, adjusting apertures etc just from pretty random shooting..all on a manual, film camera! I am glad I learned on a film camera before switching to digital. You learn to really look at your subject because you can't see what you've taken until you develop the film. Digital photography can be a bit 'automatic'. I took 'A' level Photography and this gave me my licentiateship with the Royal Photographic Society and then I kept going to classes really just to meet other photographers!

How did you get involved in ArtsFest?

I was aware of ArtsFest as I had been a visitor to the Open Studios. I never really dreamed I would show my own work. Then I realised that joining ArtsFest would be a great way to meet other artists and it would push me to exhibit. I was worried that living in Charmouth excluded me but Christne Allison was very welcoming and encouraging. I had an open studio with fellow photographer Anna Kindred. We got quite a few visitors but almost none from beyond Charmouth itself. This year I am in the Baptist Church Hall, the Malthouse as well as the Art Trail and I must say that it is a really pleasurable experience! I can just focus on what I want to show without all the upheaval of throwing one's house open to the public.

What are your main sources of inspiration?

I love the work of American photographer Freeman Patterson. He produces wonderful, textural pictures of the landscape. I also love Man Ray's portraits. I am really into texture. Texture and colour. That's why I am also inspired by fashion...Zandra Rhodes, for example. I love all those vivid colours.

And of course, I am inspired by the sea. I moved down here because I missed the coast ,having grown up by the sea.

If you could own any work of art and spend a weekend in any gallery, what would you choose?

I am passionate about sculpture. I love Clare Trenchard's work...those wonderful hares . I'd have a piece by her...or by Rodin.

It would be amazing to have a series of images by National Geographic's Carston Peter. Fantastic images..almost abstract..of extreme landscapes. I am always looking for the abstract in the landscape, seeing the patterns and textures and creating a bit of mystery by showing it not as you would normally see it.

I'd happily spend a weekend in the National Portrait Gallery....how brilliantly those artists have captured faces...they have such a timeless quality.

What would you change about ArtsFest, if anything?

I agree with Pam Allsop...paintings along the sea front a la Bayswater Road would be quite something and it would really draw people in..people who are often a bit intimidated by the idea of going into an artist's studio or a gallery, probably because they feel they will be obliged to buy something or to say nice things about the work! If it's out in the open, they can get involved without any pressure.

I think it would be great if we had a bit of fashion, too. We've got some really talented people making clothes in Lyme...Hilary Highet, Carolyn Cottle and the students at Woodroffe, too. I really think both sexes should be taught some basic needlework...how to sew on a button or turn up a pair of trousers...but that's a bit off the topic, I know!

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

Seeing everybody else's work! I just like the way there is a real buzz and so much variety...from B Sharp buskers and drumming workshops to poetry and sunrise sketching...I'll be booking to do that. I really would like to try painting again.

What I love most about ArtsFest, though, is stewarding. Sitting down and watching people and not feeling guilty about the time!