

Mel Ambrose

A woman of creative and diverse talents



The nights begin to draw in as the end of September slowly creeps towards us. Maybe some of us are starting to think of winter evening projects to absorb and occupy our time, over and above simply watching television, reading or playing on the computer. This preparatory preoccupation is unlikely to be something which disturbs Mel Ambrose. Here is a woman who simply doesn't have enough hours in the week to utilise her many skills and talents. By day, she works in the gardening trade. At all other times her time is mostly consumed by her creative activities. I received her initial offer of an interview with gratitude but as our meeting progressed, I appreciated the time and space she had carved out to talk to me during the twilight hours. It seemed inevitable we would start the conversation by discussing the current concern of many residents: namely, the proposed draft Local Plan. It is a conversation many of us have recently had with each other, using various shades of despairing, dejected, disappointed or fighting language. However, as this interview was about Mel, we parked it to one side knowing we were likely to return to it in the future. For it was Mel who was the principle point of interest and we set off at a cracking pace on what was to prove a colourful and intriguing path.

The beginning was straightforward. Mel was born in Ipswich in 1961 and came to this area in 1971.

"We lived in Beach Road East between 1971 and 1982 and I loved the access to the beach and the sea."

Colneis, Orwell and Deben were the schools where she was educated. When she reached the age when such legal requirements were behind her, she graduated to Ipswich Art School. Firstly, at the building on Argyll Street and then on Museum Street. Her aim was to do an Art Foundation course with a focus on graphic art. During this period, she produced posters and record labels amongst other works.

"I really enjoyed using all the different mediums and techniques and I really love colour. I work mainly in acrylics but enjoyed screen printing and lino cutting at Art School. I loved the technique known sgraffito where you have a coloured base covered over with a darker colour. When it is dry you scrape off the dark paint in the pattern you to reveal a coloured image. The press we used for lino

cuts was about a hundred years old. I tried portraiture by preferred abstract work. I also had a period when I outlined my images in black lines. The Art school didn't really like it and I gave up the course because they wanted me to conform to their methods. I wanted to use and develop my own. After I left I belonged to the Felixstowe Art Group for a while with my Mum but eventually let it go."

Mel showed me some of her work, which was still wrapped in the bubble wrap used to transport it to and from exhibitions. As she pulled back the protective layers, vibrant images clamoured to announce themselves. She had mentioned her love of colour and this was abundantly obvious as the first painting burst upon us. Mel explained the origin and inspiration for this extraordinary image; she is a long-time sufferer of migraines. As any other sufferer may tell you, zig-zag lines and flashing lights are often the way a migraine will manifest itself. Mel had a dispassionate moment during one episode and decided that as it was so colourful, she would recreate it in paint. The result is the image below;



'Phosphene Display' by Mel Ambrose

I viewed the piece, marvelling at Mel's creativity and ingenuity. I've since looked at other Migraine inspired paintings on Pinterest and whilst it is true, all migraine sufferers endure disturbed images, none of them quite match up to the shocking and dynamic picture above. I turned to a second work in pen and ink, the product of a dream image Mel had as a child and which she has retained to the current day. A beautiful woman appeared to her with long hands and feet. When she transformed the memory into actuality, part of which is reproduced below:



Part of Mel's childhood dream image

With refreshing openness, Mel's then revealed another aspect of her creativity. It transpired she is also a musician who plays and composes her own work. Currently, all her concentration appears focused on her music and art has taken a back seat, although they are interlinked. Both these creative expressions are physiologically affected for Mel has a comparatively rare neural condition known as synaesthesia. This isn't an illness nor is it life-threatening. It's completely harmless and is thought to be hereditary where the senses appear to blend when one sensory response triggers another, different sensory response. Mel described it as everything being slightly muddled and for her, art and music have always been interlinked. She can't remember a time when she didn't experience such reactions. At its simplest, it might be that some people taste colour. A simple example from Mel is her response to the smell of sea air; it tastes of silver. When she smells earth, she gets the colours of vibrant green and brown. In common with other synesthetes, particular sounds evoke a colour response in Mel.

I found this way of seeing and responding to the world captivating and I asked Mel which colours she sees for a range of notes. (It is sometimes known as colour hearing.)

"Middle C is the colour of a scarlet letter box; top C is pinkish with an apricot hue; lower C is magenta. D is silver and white; E flat is a greenish gold but E is yellow. F sharp is silver with grey underneath it but G flat, which is the same note in a different key, has the silver taken away. G is peacock green and A flat is a brownish rust colour."

Which colour does Mel see for herself? Red she replied and then went on to describe my own colour as orange, a combination of C and E, which makes me a chord. Her mother was also red and her father was gold. Mel speculated whether her father, also a musician, had the same condition as he would sometimes make observations about her compositions such as,

"I can see a splash of red in that section."

Whilst I am not a synesthete, Mel's truthful explanation made sense to me. Other synesthetes may have a different colour/sound response but the responses of the individual are always consistent. Kandinsky, the 20th Century Russian born artist, is now believed to have been a synesthete and he also switched his creative talents between art and music.

Her musician father gave Mel musical experiences which were uninhibited and wide-ranging. Jazz, classical, world, pop, folk; an eclectic mix of music flooded through her childhood home without barriers or boundaries, allowing her to be influenced by multifarious cultural sounds. She's been composing since she was a child, simply for piano in the first instance but latterly she's moved more towards electronic instrumental sound tracks, using a software programme called Sibelius to create her ethereal sounds. Her album, "Dark Frontier" was released in July and small samples are available through the iTunes store. Mel has created sweeping, enigmatic, ambient melodies which conjure up images of endlessly travelling through vast expanses of Space in a dream like state. Mel pressed a

copy into my hands and I decided to listen to it as I wrote about her, allowing a different medium to inform me. Her music provides a glimpse into her inner life and its complexities.



Mel in her music studio.

Mel talks about her creative life with great spirit but sadly, she has experienced untimely loss and sorrow. She met Glenn Ambrose, whom she describes as her soulmate, when she was 17 and subsequently married him. Their shared lives encompassed many different creative activities. They had their own Band, "Lost City", performing together between 1990 and 1996. Originally the music was solely composed by Mel but later they broadened their base and included more commercial music. They found their niche in pubs, clubs and Dinner Dances. Both had a love of travelling and Mel in particular was interested in visiting countries where Shamanism was practiced. (She has a fascination and respect for Nature and Shamanistic beliefs.) Mel described a 1994 trip or pilgrimage to Peru in excited detail evoking a happy period in her life which ended all too soon. In 2004, without any previous warning or indications, Glenn suddenly died at work.

Mel was widowed and alone. Death is never something people simply "get over" but the struggle to carry on was shouldered bravely. A strong, "Can Do" attitude has slowly propelled her forwards and I was conscious of feeling considerable respect for her attitude to life and death. In the face of bereavement, Mel had to adapt and the necessity of becoming independent and self-sufficient moved her in an unexpected direction. In 2005 she started working at Homebase. Suddenly, mechanical talents sprang up unannounced and certificates demonstrating her competency as a stump grinder and Forklift truck operator were added to her C.V. For all her creative talents, Mel has proved to have a grounded, practical aspect to her character. Through the influence of her current partner she has become involved in Shooting and Archery proving herself to be a dab hand in the field, as the row of awards on her shelves demonstrates. Neither of these sports were something she ever dreamt would interest her but they do and perfection is her aim. And another arena opened its doors to her as well. Mel is now part of the Coast Guard Patrol where she has become skilled in navigation and radio operations. Celestial navigation is in her sights. The sea world is her oyster.

By the time I left, the streets lights were dimly illuminating the way home. My mind was lit by the bright colours of Mel's art works and dazzled by the range of her practical talents and skills.

If you have any comments or would like to be part of this project, please contact me at:

trimleystmartinrecorder@gmail.com

LR

26/09/2018