



## ‘ART IN GLASS – AN INDUSTRIOUS DECADE’

Mel Howse is a Chichester based glass artist, and is currently working a new contemporary piece for Durham Cathedral called The Illumination window. This magazine last covered her progress in 2010 and what follows provides a short update on her works since.

Mel's background is in stained glass, graduating from Swansea Architectural Glass Department in 1992. Over time Mel's work became more contemporary in both materials and design, this has accelerated significantly with a focus specifically on the application and development of industrial glass techniques to create commissioned architectural glass art.

Mel says that she's always revelled in remaining a designer and maker, carrying out both roles throughout the creation of her work. "So much is lost in the art if one does not have your direct input, tangibly influencing the application of the design in the medium. It imbues the installed art with as much creativity as can possibly be injected, as well as freedom of expression.



In 2009, she was invited to take some space at the Hourglass glass factory by the late Peter Collins, the entrepreneurial founder of this highly regarded glass-engineering specialist. This developed after a few commissions and the growing recognition that there was merit in bringing engineering into art and art into engineering. Since this time she has made in the region of 25 installed works of art, working with and alongside Peter and his team.

Since 2007 she has been also producing many sculptural works using enamels on steel, which she has created at another well-appointed industrial facility at the A.J.Wells & Son's factory. Here she has fused her glass working skills with allied properties in metals.

Mel says that working with such industrial businesses over the long term has led to many crossover relationships with other specialist fabrication, design and engineering people that only serves to expand exponentially the opportunities for creativity.

"New design ideas arise from the possibilities created by modern technologies and processes, and this is no different in context to the now traditional craft skills that were once themselves new and cutting edge technology. New technologies are in part just a matter of perspective and societally we forget that everything was new once. We shouldn't shy away from the new because it's not how we used to do it. Harness the new opportunities that science and technology brings and use its better knowledge to moderate its application."

In the world of glass and vitreous enamels, it remains the case that translucency, colour, reflection and opacity all play an important role within the art that must engage with our audience, and the architectural nature of the Mel's art allows its integration within the modern built environment.

In 2008, after the installation of her large-scale enamelled glass façade for J.Sainsbury's, she published a record of the commission's creation. The book was called *Vitreous Art* because, Mel says, "...the reference to stained glass did not adequately describe the techniques or form of the work. I also began working on steel and wanted a new definition that could capture the common elements of both mediums in one discipline."

To take a phrase out of Mel's lecture she gave at the American Glass Guild conference in 2014, "sometimes you have to change all your tools, your environment and your expectations in order to recreate a new and more progressive view of what you do."

Some of Mel's work over the last decade is showcased here by way of example of some of the interesting projects and outcomes she has been able to generate.

Despite the contemporary nature of Mel's work she has scooped several heritage awards for modern work in heritage environments.

In 2013 she won The Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust's first Award for Excellence, and in 2018 she became a trustee of The Radcliffe Trust. >



### 1. St Cuthbert's, Copnor, Portsmouth 2013-2017

#### Steel Font and Reredos

Mel has enjoyed a long and creative relationship with St Cuthbert's Church in Portsmouth. St Cuthbert's undertook on a major re-ordering to their vast Victorian building, which gave the local community a doctor's surgery, community rooms, a nursery, as well as their own very special worship space.

Architects Nick Lee Evans LLP designed the architectural scheme. One of the most exciting aspects of the interior of the new St Cuthbert's Church is its significant scale, its majestic arches, and its light.

Mel designed 'The Vortex font' which appears as a pillar or vortex of water bursting out of the church floor. At the base, the design starts as a spiral progressively working its way up the base – its continuity representing regeneration. The baptism vessel appears to be held atop of the rising water.

The font has a centred and visually-powerful shape, accentuating the grounding and symbolism of God and the Trinity. The energetic and elaborate piece is made in enamelled steel and combines skilled woodworking elements and novel metalwork.

St Cuthbert's also commissioned reredos to give further focus to the sanctuary. The enamelled steel reredos echoes the design generated within the font, and represents the spirit of St Cuthbert and his links with the land and the sea.

Seen from the back of the church it looks as if the reredos design is rising from the font, and the font rising from the floor.

### 2. Otford Methodist Church 2017

#### Glass Façade and Carved Glass Cross

Otford Methodist Church in Kent completed the construction of a

new church in 2017. This state-of-the-art building was designed by Clague Architects and looks to the future of the church family.

Mel Howse was commissioned to design for the new 26m<sup>2</sup> south-facing façade window that greets you on the approach to the building and faces directly into the community. The design composition is abstract with an open interpretation. Its tessellated style is inspired by the elements as described in the Bible, and has a celestial feel.

The design team commissioned a light path analysis, showing that the southerly sun coming through the facade could be very bright at some times of the day. For this reason the art is deeply coloured throughout the glazing. To lighten the architectural weight of the elevation, the glass and the art within animates the roof line. Internally the art glass is an expressive backdrop to worship, whilst the building wears its heart on its sleeve viewed externally.

In addition Mel was also commissioned to make a life-size glass cross, which resides centrally at the back of the generous-curved dais. In contrast to the window, this is a visually weightless and sensitive piece in uncoloured carved glass, and which is designed to be illuminated from all angles and work with the lighting designer's lighting scenes.

### 3. Portland Road Hove

#### Public Art

This public art project was completed in 2015 and has since won awards for its development, its architecture and its art. The developer was Affinity Sutton and their architect Conran and Partners, and the scheme involved the redevelopment of a once-loved but now redundant Art Deco cinema.

The new building, Friese Greene House, is named after William Friese Greene (1855-1921) who lived in the town. He was a portrait photographer, an inventor and a pioneer cinematographer in the world of the early motion picture.

Mel was commissioned to design and make architectural glass on its principal southern façade. The design of the art formed a connection between a much-loved Deco cinema and the new building.

Mel's designs use forms that are geometric and employ the interaction of linear and curvilinear shapes. It is an Art Deco vision in our time, using today's materials and industrial techniques whilst honouring the sensibilities of the Deco style.

The installation is strengthened further by the use of monochromatic surfaces within the glasswork. The interaction of light within the surface creates a very contemporary feel to the art. All techniques make use of available light whether natural or artificial. This means that the piece visually functions from every angle, inside and out, and at all times of the day or night.

In this respect art meets industry in this twenty-first century, as it did nearly 100 years ago, with Mel using glass working techniques for toughened glass that have been developed to suit the required performance.

The installation won The Building Craft Award from the Sussex Heritage Trust. ■

You can find more information at [www.vitreousart.com](http://www.vitreousart.com)

IMAGES: 01-03 St Cuthbert's, Copnor, Portsmouth. 04 & 05 Otford Methodist Church. 06 & 07 Portland Road, Hove.