

The Art of Life in Challenging Times:

Melinda Powell interviews Dorchester artist Tracy Lester

Readers may recall the beautifully rendered still life paintings and portraits by local artist Tracy Lester at the Abbey's September 2020 'What did you do during lockdown?' exhibition. Eight months on, having contributed to the Oxfordshire Art-weeks, Tracy shares with us her journey as an artist and talks about the paths her art has taken during the pandemic.

For those of us still feeling constrained by restrictions and concerned about new variants, Tracy's art, like her painting of a 'Red red robin' poised on a branch, brings to life words penned by the American poet Emily Dickinson:



Red red robin

'Hope' is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

Join Tracy as she takes us on a journey into the art of life in challenging times.

Tell us about your journey as an artist.

Three years ago, I would not have called myself an artist. I have worked as a Consultant Scientist in Genetics for over 25 years, helping people with very rare disorders to reach a diagnosis. Drawing from observation in biology was about as much art as I did at school - so how did I get to be where I am now?

To cut a long story short, I had a mid-life burn-out. Symptoms started in 2003, following the birth of my second daughter, a house move and job relocation. My face became swollen, and I had a fever that required antibiotics. In 2004, I developed extremely itchy rashes over my body, and my joints began to ache, symptoms I put down to allergies. I was constantly tired but thought that wasn't unusual for a working mum with two young children.

My GP immediately suspected Lupus, also known as SLE (systemic lupus erythematosus) - an auto-immune condition with sunlight sensitivity. A specialist confirmed the diagnosis, put me on medication and advised me to avoid sunlight. For a while my symptoms were kept at bay, and I continued to over-work, renovating a house whilst juggling childcare and work.

After the birth of my third child, symptoms came back with renewed force. I tried painkillers, anti-inflammatory drugs



Tracy Lester

and steroids. My diagnosis was revised to 'rhupus', as I had symptoms of both lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. My immune system was attacking my joints. At its worst, I struggled to get dressed and out of the house. Every small movement hurt, even chewing. Something had to change.

My work-life balance was out of whack. Exhausted and overwhelmed by pain, I signed up for counselling, and slowly my life changed. I took time for myself, taking naps during the day and delegating more. I started yoga and Salsa dancing. I meditated and watched my diet. My marriage of over 20 years ended. I started listening to my body, and slowly I got better.

I realised I craved creativity. As a child I had been very creative: drawing, knitting, making models, sewing. Although I had been channelling my creative energy into house projects, I had a yearning to paint. I signed up for a local art class, and then found a wonderful teacher of oil-painting on-line, Roisin O'Farrell. I took her course and fell in love with oil painting.

I am continuing to learn and create and am now almost totally free of pain and on much reduced medication. I can even go out in the sun without it triggering a flare-up!



Sunset through the trees

Painting is my therapy and I hope that my paintings bring you the same joy that I feel when painting them. Thanks for joining me on my artistic journey - please sign up to my mailing list if you would like to keep up-to-date with new works.

How has your experience as an artist been influenced by the long lockdowns?

Painting in oils, I am inspired by the colours and forms in the natural world. Unable to travel, I was inspired instead by photographs and objects in my home and garden. Nature still inspires my still life paintings, which almost invariably feature something natural, such as fruit, flowers, or a random leaf. The joy that nature brings me inspires bright colours that represent happiness to me. For me, painting is a meditative process that switches off the monkey mind's constant worry. When my right brain takes over, I see shapes, angles and colours.

During lockdown, I found support and friendship on-line from a community of artists and tried portrait painting. Sky TV broadcasted a 4-hour 'Portrait Artist of the Week' paint-along program via Facebook on Sunday mornings, with thousands of artists joining in and submitting their paintings via Instagram. The program was a welcome break from lockdown isolation.

For Artweeks, you created a wonderful ‘flipsnack’ book online about your work. Many of the paintings are of birds. Could you tell us what it is like to paint birds, especially the ‘Red red robin’? Do you ‘see’ birds differently now?

During the pandemic I had to shield because my medication suppresses my immune system. I worked from home five days a week and was unable to go far beyond the garden. The birds were a great distraction from the tedium of daily life, and I enjoyed watching their antics out of the window. Luckily, I found a fantastic resource of photographs for artists and decided to have a go at painting some. ‘Red, red robin’ was the first, and I enjoyed studying his form and colour closely. I was surprised to find purple amongst his feathers as well as orange! Through the close study of painting, I am now better able to recognise the different species, including the kingfisher pictured here.



Blue into green

In April 2021, you took part in a charity fundraiser called ‘Incognito’. Tell us about the fundraising event and what inspired you to contribute to it?

Incognito is an art sale that takes place in Ireland every April to raise money for the Jack and Jill Children’s Foundation. Artists create three artworks on postcards, sold incognito through auction – the buyers don’t know who has painted the piece until after purchase. As some famous people, like Bono from U2, take part, this generates interest, and the cards sell out very quickly! The money raised helps provide home nursing care for extremely sick children. Through my work in Genetics, I come across many serious diagnoses in young children, and one of my own children was hospitalised just before his first birthday and needed life-saving emergency surgery. I am therefore acutely aware of how important this care is to families



Squirrel for Incognito Art Sale



Life is a bowl of cherries

and have donated paintings for the last three years. A similar event happens every other year to support Sobell House hospice, to which I also donate.

Your painting ‘Life is a bowl of cherries’ illustrates your love for still life painting. What are some of the joys and challenges of such artistry?

Still life paintings are challenging because it is difficult to set up an interesting composition using everyday objects although it means I’m never short of something to paint because they can change whilst painting as the shadows move and flowers wilt. However, they can elevate seemingly mundane objects into an object of desire! So, from that perspective they can be very rewarding.

What are you looking forward to painting in future?

I would like to paint more of the Oxfordshire rivers and waterways like ‘Thames at dawn’. I am interested in how humans interact with their surroundings for mutual benefit and am considering a series featuring people living and working on or near the water, but the landscape will be the primary focus.



Thames at Dawn

For more of Tracy’s work, see:
<https://www.tracylesterart.com>
<https://www.instagram.com/tracylesterart/>
<https://www.facebook.com/tracylesterart>
Email sign up: <https://eepurl.com/gFyHgb>

Contact Melinda Powell at DRImelinda@ccpe.org.uk, if you have a topic you would like written up or if you would like to be included in a ‘newcomer’ article.