

REVIEW: Summer lecture Friday 14 June Amber Hiscott 'Paint, Paper, Glass ...'

Amber Hiscott, who studied architectural glass at Swansea College of Art in the 1970s, then with Ludwig Schraffrath, has designed, as well as many windows and screens, free-standing glass sculptures and installations. This lecture gave the audience a very personal insight into her sources of inspirations and working methods over her varied career. She began: 'My curiosity with the natural world began in childhood after I was saved from going over the rapids by my brother. Some time later I became fascinated by a tin of powdered vermilion paint ... I lowered my face into it and blew! These early experiences ended up as leitmotifs. Paint, paper ... the childhood hood game requires the energy of two people. You can only learn to work through a material by playing with it, as most of my work has been.'

Her first commission, whilst still at Swansea Art College, sold just for £50, but in 1980 came her first big opportunity: she was offered the commission for Unilever Headquarters, London after Johannes Schreiter's designs were rejected. Another high-profile early piece was the entrance canopy for Liberty in Regent Street in her Swansea studio, which she made in her studio in Wales.

Amber often uses images from the natural world in her windows. An early (1980s) church commission was a series of panels depicting the Seven Sacraments along the west wall at Our Lady Of The Taper, Carmarthen (the National Shrine of Wales). Here she used both plant imagery, the forms simply depicted and acid etched, and the language of colour to represent theological concepts: a vineyard for 'Holy Orders', flowers and a bud for 'Marriage', green for healing and growth. A further window for the north side in 1998 used flowers associated with the Virgin Mary. Flower motifs were painted freely in enamels, which she now frequently uses as well as silver stain used like paint. Another Carmarthen window, at Llandovery College Chapel (1991), used abstract forms cut from transparent glass to integrate the trees beyond the window into the design, acid etched and plated to achieve brilliant, complex layers of colour within the dim space, and spare, precise leading.

Amber approaches each commission uniquely, considering its relationship both to the commissioner and its environment, and often starts by bringing the subject into her own experience, which often involves travel. For one privately commissioned window, she began by camping out in the commissioners' garden – their ancestors had hidden King James in a tree, so she chose this as a motif. For a window at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, where theatregoers are taken into an imaginary world and actors receive flowers after the performance, she used this ritual as her inspiration, arriving with a bunch of freesias and saying 'I want to make windows that look the ways these freesias smell'. A sandblasted screen for Musgrove Park Hospital in Taunton depicts reeds from the surrounding waterways of the Somerset Levels. At the Great Western Hospital in Swindon, ideas for the screens came from sketches done on her Ridgeway walks.

Her initial studies are generally done as watercolours, often abstract, in natural surroundings such as by water or in caves. Sometimes her travels are serendipitous. For a window for a couple to celebrate their long time together, Amber went on a trip to waterfall as they had met by one. However, she tripped and her notebooks ended up in the water. As a result, she branched out into design using waterjet cutting for the first time.

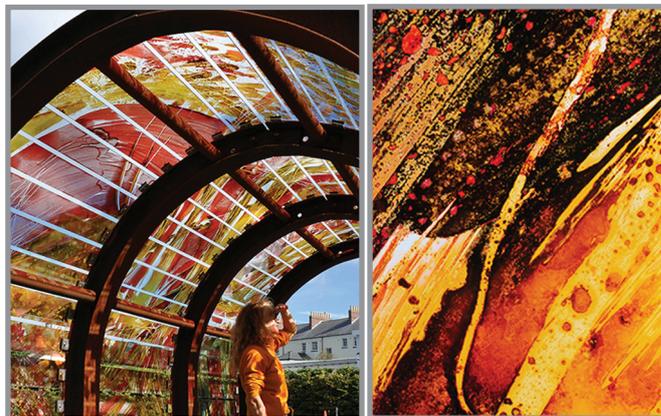
Amber also likes to stretch paper under water and use the effect obtained as the basis for ideas. Her abstract watercolours are dances of colour reminiscent of Kandinsky. In 1998 the Sheffield Cathedral lantern was reconstructed atop the proposed baptistery as a representation of the Crown of Thorns, and new glass with a theme symbolising baptism was designed by Amber. Her design considered the effect of light falling on the cathedral steps, in sweeps of exuberant colour, which although abstract also contain many references – to The Resurrection and Holy Spirit (golds and reds) transforming human conflict and struggle (blues and violets) and leading to healing, growth and new life (greens).

She used a combination of old and new techniques to arrive at the windows' vivid colour juxtaposition without leading - partly etching, sandblasting and painting in loosely brushed enamels on flashed antique glass in her studio, and partly using the state-of-the-art lamination facilities of Peters in Germany (right).



Water is another prominent leitmotif. At Cardiff Millennium Centre, Amber's 'Colourfall' window effects a waterfall of colours cascading from the function rooms above to the coffee shop below. Many of her free-standing sculptural installations are similarly a colourful play of glass with water. Sometimes they also involve words. One such, now standing in her garden stream and titled 'Cloc Dwr', is made of laminated clear-glass strips arranged into a prism, inscribed with poetry – which was read out to us in Welsh at the lecture. The 1996 sculptural piece 'Leafboat', atop a waterfall fountain in Swansea's Castle Square, was similarly inspired by lines from Dylan Thomas: 'We sail a boat upon the path / paddle with leaves / down an ecstatic line of light'.

Other installations encourage viewer participation and invite an emotional response. The 1993 sculpture in Bradford Exchange Square 'Quatrefoil for Delius' is a 20 ft long steel/glass structure forming two leaves, one decaying and skeletal and one alive, to represent the composer's love of nature and recurrent interest in the themes of life, death and regeneration; it creates a long tunnel to walk through. The 'Tunnel of Light', exhibited in late 2010 at her MA exhibition at Swansea Waterfront Museum, is on a similar note. The frame is a recycled coalmine entrance (borrowed from a scrapyards), which she covered with float glass and painted with silver stain (below, detail on right). The design is based on a watercolour done in Paviland cave on the Gower coast where the paleolithic Red Lady (who was actually a man) was found. The viewer sitting / standing within the tunnel also listens to sea sounds that Amber had recorded while in the cave.



Amber has also worked with David Pearl on screens at North Wales Cancer Treatment Centre (2000) where she incorporated patients' ideas, and on sculptural towers. The 2005 Twr Dwr (Blue Water Towers), originally made in float glass in 2000, were remade in anodized aluminium after being vandalized, for which complicated engineering tests were necessary. They are now an elegant sapphire blue, laser cut with zigzags to evoke water spray, to a design based on her watercolour 'Crossing to Bardsey'. Contrasting these in a nearby location are the two multicolour 'Razor Shells' (2008) in powerful pure tones – red, blue, green and yellow – shouting out to passers-by. These and other towers demonstrate the effect that pure colour and shape can have on the viewer's emotions.

Amber is presently painting four windows for a 'cosmic corridor' at the Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont, based on a book she read there about the birth of the universe, and the evolution of life.

Chris Wyard, all photos ©Amber Hiscott