



JOHN BEST, CHAIR  
ARTS GATEWAY MK

### The Framing Business

Art is all around us and we all take some sort of interest in it, even if it's no more than "do we like the colour?" or "do we recognise somewhere or somebody." Hopefully our interest goes a little deeper than that, and we have our favourites. Nearly all of this is presented to us in a way that brings out the best of the piece.

**T**his month I want to look at the teams who do the framing. According to a quick scan on the internet, Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire have around 40 framing businesses between them. I'm guessing that means about 100 framing specialists and maybe 200 other people whose livelihood is linked to those 40 businesses. Not as many framers as we have artists, but still a significant cohort. One thing that has struck me as I've visited a few of them in both areas, is how entrepreneurial all these framing businesses are – maybe with so much competition and such small profit margins, they have to be to thrive. I've picked four of the forty for a closer look.

### The Framing Centre

Kamal Ravaliya established the business in Northampton in 2000 and now operates a string of framing shops across the sub-region including Buckingham, Yarnton, Horsham, Kingsthorpe and Bracknell. The Wellingborough Road premises in Northampton is his base, where he employs five framers, and the business as a whole over 25 other staff. They make a wide range of frames in-house – over 5,000 every month – including aluminium mouldings from Spain and Italy. They offer a large range of off-the-peg wooden frames as well as framed art and made-to-order framing. Like most

framers, an important part of the business is around sports memorabilia. Although Kamal flags up that he serves corporate as well as retail customers, his business is the closest we have to an accessible, walk-in service available all over the sub-region. Frames for all, at affordable prices.

### DMR

Occupying a very distinct part of the market is DMR in Milton Keynes. Gary Richards started the business with his son David (after whose initials the company is named) in 1993, after a commercial career as Branch Manager for a Building Society. Twenty-three years on, the business seldom advertises, relying instead on reputation and word-of-mouth, and operates from a small industrial unit in Crownhill with little if any passing-trade. His commercial experience has fashioned a business which increasingly derives its business from repeat commissions from the corporate market, now representing around 85% of what they do. Over the years the competition has moved on or slipped away, leaving DMR to do what they do best. When not satisfying the corporate market, DMR meets the demands of artists or members of the retail public. While I was visiting him I met customer Kim Hurry who had a very special piece to frame: a large expression of 40 great things about her partner, a surprise gift for his 40th Birthday.

She needed reassurance not only that it would be well framed, but also that nothing would be published about it until after the big day – happily before the *Pulse* publication date! This was her first visit on the project, so I didn't get to see the finished product.

### Picture Perfect and Primrose Gallery

Arts is the theme behind all my articles and, of the four framers highlighted, Picture Perfect has the closest link to Fine Art. So close in fact that, at least for the next few weeks, they share space with a real-life art gallery in Primrose Gallery. They have direct links to 40 or so individual artists and nearby galleries, and are seeing more commercial photographers in their premises.

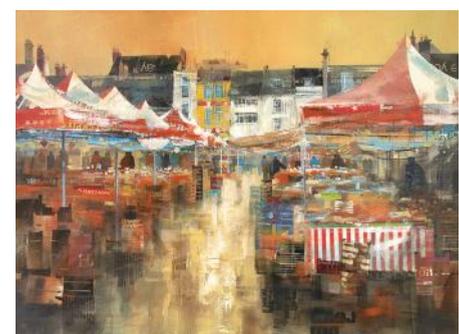
In a few weeks they move out of the Harborough Road, Northampton, premises to make way for an apartment development, and take on much larger industrial premises at Lodge Farm. Neil Duguid, the driving force behind Picture Perfect and Primrose, would be sorry to see the last of the space, not least because the gallery would no longer sit beside the framing. In reality, galleries face an uphill struggle in the face of online sales; social media and a web presence already support a great deal of what Primrose and Picture Perfect do. The framing business will grow in new premises with much better



The Framing Centre, ctsy John Best



Gary and David Richards with Kim Hurry, DMR, ctsy John Best



Ed Robinson's 'Northampton Marketplace', framed and displayed at Primrose Gallery



car parking and more space to spread out. Rae Flack and Charlotte Bason, backbone of this framing business, were looking forward to a positive future with the move. They would continue to be entertained by the range of artefacts they frame including, apparently, car gears and a machete, as well as the ubiquitous sports memorabilia. Neil also runs a well respected framing, picture restoration and art suppliers shop in Stony Stratford, Skills Art Materials, which complements the art side of the framing business very well.

**Framemaker**

My final subject is truly at the industrial end of the entrepreneurship spectrum. I'm grateful to Sales Manager Ian Scott for this potted history. Framemaker started less than a decade ago making picture-frames in premises at Broughton in Milton Keynes. Business went well, they added memorabilia, particularly sporting items, to their core business and expanded into space at Stacey Bushes. Three years ago they outgrew that space as



Framed poppies at Framemaker, ctsy John Best



Impressive surrealism at Framemaker, ctsy John Best

they added mirrors as a third family of products – not least an inspired way to shift large frames. They're now in a large industrial unit in old Wolverton where they've added a fourth business, a nationwide delivery service, ensuring all their customers get the goods on time, in good condition, nearly always free, with a free returns policy. They are certainly framers to both corporate and internet markets, but they're also a whole lot more. Their cavernous showroom has a breathtaking range of artefacts – admittedly mostly not 'works of art' – but all making a striking visual impact with a cacophony of mirrors reflecting off each other, a guerilla army of unexpected shiny things that keep cropping up, and surely the most extraordinary range of uniquely

packaged or in many cases fabricated memorabilia. Framed patchwork football shirts made from parts of over a dozen shirts worn by Stephen Gerrard in heroic encounters; armchairs upholstered in all parts of a star footballer's kit (you sit on the shorts and lean back on the shirt); Framed poppies from the Tower of London installation; Usain Bolt's (gold-plated, of course) running shoe. It's moments like this that remind me why I write these pieces: the surreal research

makes it all worth while. That's framing for you.

**Conclusion**

Picture framers are mostly unsung footsoldiers of the art world: there when you want them, essential to the delivery and presentation of the work, but seldom if ever celebrated. My short tour of Milton Keynes and Northampton framers has revealed not only the variety of business models being followed, but the energetic creativity in finding the right niche, the right mix of specialisms and the right premises to thrive in a challenging market. We should all take another look at what's around our art. And we should all drop in and have a look around. We could be startled. ■

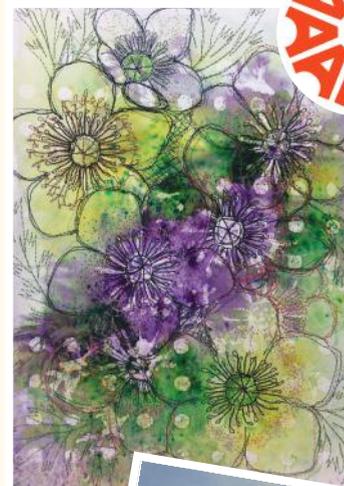
**NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL**

This month the update from Arts Central is focusing on some of our artists and their involvement in Bucks Open Studios, now in its fourth decade. BOS happens every June, with around 400 artists taking part, mostly from the south of the County. We want more representation from the Milton Keynes end so this year several of our artists are putting together a larger group to exhibit at our **AC at the Cornerstone** gallery at the Cornerstone Church, under the banner **Mix3d Stitch and Friends** from June 12th to 26th. The exhibition presents a range of creative practices including drawing, sculpture and painting alongside

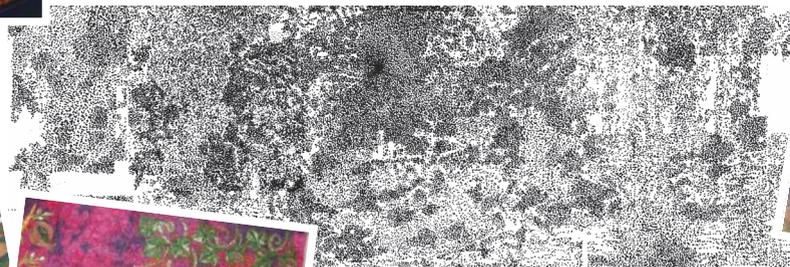
textile art and will be open seven days a week, staffed on Wednesdays and at weekends. The project involves, from AC at Norfolk House, **Jane Charles** (textiles), **Elaine McKenzie** (art dolls), **Yvonne Elliott** (textiles), **Lily Glover-Wright** (painting), **Nicola Saunderson** (drawing), **Tracey Mason** (painting) and they are joined by **Hilary Grayson** (textiles), **Jane Rhodes** (painting) and **Jane Sharp** (Textiles). Across the nine of them, expect an interesting mix of ideas, themes and techniques creating a dramatic display around the gallery's gently curving walls. We're hoping that following this success, they will repeat some of the exploration during our **Milton Keynes Arts Week** in late September.



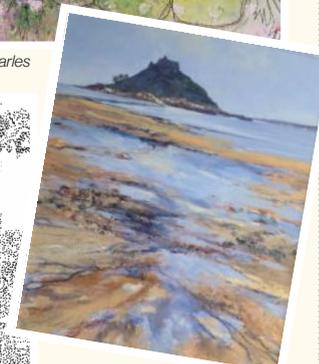
Elaine McKenzie



Jane Charles



Nicola Saunderson



Jane Rhodes



Lily Glover-Wright



Hilary Grayson

Photos ctsy Mix3d Stitch and Friends

**AND FINALLY...** For those who would like to get involved in any of these projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on our website at [www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk](http://www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk) email me at [john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk](mailto:john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk) or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.