



THE ARTS

The Gyosei Art Trail



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ARTS GATEWAY MK

This month I want to look at a very special sort of art exhibition, a project in Milton Keynes, but one which holds an opportunity for anywhere in MK and Northamptonshire with canals or rivers.

In the four years I've been involved in the Canal & River Trust, who manage the canal system across England and Wales, I've been impressed how they and their predecessors have exploited opportunities for many art forms: poetry carved into new lock gates; appointment of a succession of canal laureates; film or theatre aboard narrow boats; heroic sculptures like the giant Kelpies by the Falkirk Wheel; taking youngsters on a life-changing Shakespearian trip from Stratford (East) to Stratford (upon Avon); dance on or around the waterway. There's no shortage of great ideas and great artists to put them into effect. The key ingredient is an organisation able to make them happen.



The Grand Union Canal is already a pretty place, ctsy JB

The Gyosei Art Trail

The project I'm highlighting this month has certainly been supported by the Canal & River Trust but it has been led by an ambitious Parish Council, Campbell Park, and put together with determination and attention to detail. These things don't just happen, they need project managing. And I'm grateful to the Campbell Park team for providing much of the background on the artists they selected.

This story starts in the early 1980s when Milton Keynes (b 1967) was still a teenager and the MK

Development Corporation was brimming with ideas for putting MK on the map. One of these was to attract Japanese firms with the most prestigious Japanese boarding-school outside Japan, for the children of expatriate Japanese business families in Europe. The Gyosei International School was opened in 1987, with boarding capacity for over 900 students. Sadly the timing wasn't perfect, the Japanese economy went into a spin and after 15 years the school closed. Several years later the empty school buildings have been replaced by a highly successful Extra Care village at Lovat Fields, and a Barratt Homes housing development sits on

what were playing fields. The developer contributed £60,000 under a percent-for-art policy, and Great Linford Parish Council picked up the baton.

The project team under Great Linford Parish Council included planning authority Milton Keynes Council, The Parks Trust, the Canal & River Trust and the Public Arts Trust MK. Early on they appointed a professional curator for the project, Liisa Clark, an artist of whom I've written in the past, community views were sought and a project manager put in place. This is how, given collaboration and determination, dreams can become reality.

Justin Tunley, Sculptor in Steel

The Art Trail starts at Gyosei Gardens in the heart of the new residential neighbourhood, with a commemorative plaque giving the background to the site above the original school foundation stone from 1987, crowned by a layered stainless steel sculptural map showing where on the canal the other sculptures are sited. Justin trained as an Industrial Designer and now explores the intersections between manufacture, landscape, building and art often, as in this case, using Computer Aided Design and laser cutting techniques.

Linda Johns, Arachne Weaves

As you walk north from Gyosei Gardens the path takes you on a boardwalk through woodland. You're quite likely to miss the next piece, nestling high in the natural environment. Northamptonshire-



Laser cut mapping by Justin Tunley at the Trail start, ctsy JB





Tracery among the trees, from Linda Johns, ctsy JB



Rob Griffiths' oak seat proving hard to resist, ctsy JB

based Linda Johns makes sculpture using metal rods, fine wires, and natural materials, and places these seemingly delicate structures in forests and other natural environments. Her sculptures are 'glimpsed from the corner of your eye, there or not there, as you pass by, seeing them from different angles'. Just like spiders weaving, she looks for ways to create strong forms but using the minimum of material. Here she has used the brace line between the tree trunks as a structural point for two webs, just as a spider would take advantage of what it finds. Beautiful, once you spot it.

Rob Griffiths, What Lies beneath

Further along the canal, and crossing over a footbridge you cannot fail to see the charming frog seat designed and made by Rob Griffiths. Born of his love of the forest and the wildlife that surrounds him, his sculptures all use sustainably sourced timber.

What Lies Beneath uses Forest of Dean oak, and draws on an interest in canals and the creatures in, around and beneath them. It takes the form of a bench with relief carvings illustrating the food chain in the canal and a giant frog sitting peacefully unaware of all that lies beneath. As a place to sit it is irresistible.

Ptolemy Elrington, Dragonfly

Not far north from the frog seat is another welcome surprise. Mounted high on a steel pole overlooking the water is Ptolemy Elrington's imaginative piece. A giant dragonfly which, in Japan, is taken as a symbol of courage, strength and happiness, soars against the sky or is half-lost against the summer foliage. No surprise, when you see the ingenious



Recycled materials in Ptolemy Elrington's Dragonfly, ctsy OneMK

use of recycled materials from familiar objects, that Ptolemy cut his teeth in set and stage design and large scale community projects. He has brought his interest in recovered materials to this piece which, if you're not looking out for it, you might miss. That would be a shame.

Laura Boswell, Local Birds and Plants

Next up, along the west bank of the canal and tucked under the H4 road bridge, we have the bonus presentation of seven enamel prints in a single installation. Laura Boswell is an artist printmaker who pursued a career in the photographic industry for many years before



Laura Boswell's seven enamel panels, ctsy JB



Illustrated wildlife from Jeremy Turner, ctsy JB



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returning to printmaking in 2005. Based in North Buckinghamshire, in 2009 and 2013 she undertook international print residencies in Japan to train with Japanese masters in traditional Japanese woodblock. Laura's seven enamel panels present local birds using a Japanese aesthetic, combining her training in Japanese woodblock and the practicality of vitreous enamelling. The quietly beautiful images are supplemented with Japanese short poems to bring together both local and Japanese ideas about seasonality and local wildlife.

Jeremy Turner, Three Post bench

At this point you have a choice whether to continue on the west bank or crossing, as I did, to admire quite the brightest three post bench I've encountered. Jeremy Turner is an amazing MK-based sculptor in wood and I have to admit to having one of his sculptural seats in my garden, acquired just this year. After graduating as a sculptor in 1970, he didn't formally start his woodcarving business until 1985, whereby he supplies a diverse public through craft shops, fairs, public commissions and hands-on teaching in schools and colleges. I know and value from my own experience his fascination with translating concise drawn images into tangible artefacts.

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The striking three post bench Jeremy has made for this commission derives its design from the sculptural benches Jeremy made for Woburn Safari Park. The oak posts and the head rail across the top present robustly carved and brightly coloured relief images of the wildlife of the canal including coarse fish, coot, moorhens, ducks, geese and swans, water beetles, snails, flying insects and all the micro life too: the insect larvae, diatoms, floral algae, hydra and amoebae. And it's not only a comfortable place to sit, but you can also see across the canal to the next piece in the trail.



Ghostly transparency from a golden age, ctsy JB

Andrew Kay, Life-sized Shire Horse in Steel

For a closer look at this magnificent steel shire horse you need to double-back across the canal. It's worth the short detour to see this impressive reference to the beasts that worked the 18th and 19th century canals. Based in Cumbrian moorland, Andrew Kay creates sculpture that draws from the natural world for inspiration. For the Gyosei Art Trail, Andrew has created a powerful creature, capturing both its huge strength and solidity and its calm, resolute temperament.

Melanie Watts, Autumn Splendour

Melanie is a Milton Keynes mosaic artist of whom I've written about several times, as she was based in Arts Central for many years both at Station House and at Norfolk House until earlier this year. Trained in textiles and interior design, Melanie has built up her practice around a deep love of mosaic and the art of creating beauty out of many fragments. She has worked



*Autumn colours and nocturnal light
In mosaic, ctsy JB*

internationally as well as nationally. For this piece she has created a fabulous autumnal night-time scene in which she skilfully plays light around the central barn owl swooping into the Great Linford foliage to capture its prey. A beautiful, resonant piece that adds greatly to her portfolio of memorable work.

Phase one of a great project

Waterways are inherently beautiful places and a nearby surface of water transforms the light and how you

experience it. The Gyosei Art Trail undoubtedly adds even more to the experience of this stretch of water; Great Linford Parish Council and everyone else involved are to be congratulated and wished well for future phases. They have turned a pleasant canalside walk into an artistic adventure. Go walk it. ■

NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

Fresh from our *Môtus* festival of dynamic dance, and our successful season of events in *MK Festival Fringe*, in which we presented four events, we are now putting the finishing touches to the very first *Milton Keynes Arts Week*. MKAW will offer open studio access to lovers of art or the just plain curious, from 24th September for nine days. We are aiming to have 80 artists signed up, some in their own studios, some grouping together in established arts venues (eg Cornerstone) and a few taking over non-arts venues as pop-up exhibitions (we may not know those until the last minute!). Artists booking early enough will be highlighted in our hard-copy catalogue; late-comers will still be included in the on-line catalogue. We look forward to building the scale of the open studios event, drawing from north Bucks, south Northants and west Beds over the next few years.

To justify the plural in MK Arts Week's name we'll also be highlighting several other art forms, bringing the programme squarely into the field of Performance. We start with the launch, at Arts Central's third *Festival of Nations* on September 24th. This will be a day-long opportunity for cultural communities to bring and celebrate something from their own culture: there'll be song, story, costume, poetry, dance, art, food and film.



Narrated art, music, dance and audience at Art in Motion in July, ctsy JB

We then have a dance event with *Môtus* at Newton Longville Community Hall on 25th, and an inclusive theatre event with *Pandora Diverse Arts* at Arts Central on 28th September.

On 30th we repeat the successful *Bodies as One* bodypainting event at Arts Central and hold a *Poetry and Art* event at Westbury Arts Centre on 1st October.

Finally we close with *Art in Motion* on 2nd October, successfully piloted in the Fringe, this time moved to the Arts Central theatre.

Norfolk House is full, but **we have space** for visual artists at *Clyde House Studios*. And we're in the throes of pulling together a very exciting proposal for future use of the former CMK bus station, with a combination of cultural café, display of MK's best ideas, digital accelerator, permanent centre for urban arts and outside space for cultural events. Fingers crossed.



Body art, film, music, dance and audience at Bodies as One in July, ctsy JB

AS ALWAYS... 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 email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.