

Rachel Lewis has been a member of ROAR for five years, and has made herself well-

‘I think about my skills as an artist as a gift from God’

Chase correspondent **AMY FORDE**, marketing and communications assistant at Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR), talks to artist Rachel Lewis about faith, hands and Gilbert O’Sullivan!

RACHEL Lewis is currently president of Rotherham Society of Artists, a group who meet on Fridays at the Unity Centre, and also runs a weekly art class in Ravenfield which is well attended by those in the area.

She has also been involved with Wath Hall Limited, a charity campaign group who have been helping raise finance and creating a long-term plan for the historic Wath Hall building. Rachel curated exhibitions at the site to draw people in, another way that she met more artists in and around Rotherham.

It surprises me then that she tells me she has had no formal art training and has spent most of her working life as a physiotherapist: “My art timeline, we can call it, started seven years ago when I had children. With sleep deprivation and post-natal depression, my focus strangely became painting.

“I knew I had an hour a day when they napped when I could devote myself to it.”

The piece that came out of this hour a day is called Honey Jars. When she later shows me the piece, knowing the back story I could see so much symbolism in those three jars of honey glistening against a stormy backdrop.

From this work it all spring-boarded. Her next collection focused on hands, something which happened organically as part of Open Studios weekend here at ROAR.

A lady, who was being photographed by a fellow ROAR member as part of the event, caught Rachel’s attention: “Whilst she sat there, this lady’s hands were just glowing through the light from the window and were just absolutely stunning.

“So I sneakily took a digital shot of her hands whilst her portrait was being done.”

Rachel has gone on to capture two different versions of this picture, one in oil and one in acrylic. The piece features as part of Rotherham’s Gallery Town, Rotherham’s open air art gallery.

Rachel says there is no set theme to her artwork, which somewhat mirrors how she talks about herself as someone who is always juggling a number of projects at once.

She tells me, “I am drawn to what I want to draw”, but hands are something she has captured more than once, most recently her vicar’s: “I had got quite a simple image of praying hands but we ended up doing one with the chalice, and with all the reflections in the chalice it was quite striking.” It currently sits comfortably on the church’s prayer table.

On this fascination with hands she explains: “I think they are people, not in a crazy sense. But I think they are really expressive.”

She also adds that it was this part of the body which she focused on when she was a physiotherapist, anatomically a fascinating area. The connection to hands has always been there.

Although never having formal training, like many of the artists she has always been creative.



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known within the Rotherham arts scene



She tells me that aged three she once captured musician Gilbert O'Sullivan sat on a piano, a piece which went on to take pride of place in her headmistress's office. She jokes: "You could call this interview from Gilbert O'Sullivan to God."

Indeed her faith is something she has mentioned throughout our conversation. She has just taken on the role of church warden, and it seems that this is an important part of her artistic progression: "My faith is growing as is my confidence in my art. Part of that is because I think about my skills as an artist as a gift from God. That it is something I have been blessed with and I can use for other people and share with other people."

Another important characteristic is her desire to learn and continue to grow and develop her skills.

A lot of this has been aided by her work teaching, as she puts it: "I have to learn things thoroughly in order to be able to teach that topic."

Not only does it strike me that this is something she prides herself in, but is also crucial to this point in her creative journey.

As we look over her work at the end of the interview, there is a lot of exploration in both medium and theme. She admits she hasn't quite found her niche yet, but that in itself is part of the process.

There is a real hunger to push her practice further, exhibit more and further promote herself and her work.

She tells me that for a long time she didn't call herself an artist, it "didn't fit", but I get the sense that this change in mindset has really helped: "What I would really like to do is organise myself to be more professional in how I market my work, and in particular how it's presented."

So my challenge here is to actually have a career development."

A great ambition to have and one I am sure she will succeed in.



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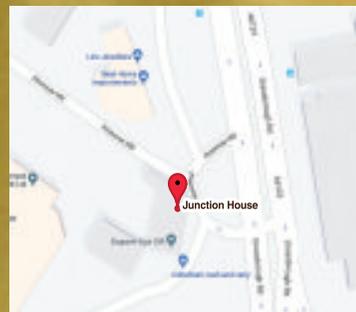
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