

## Friends of York Art Gallery

Q and A: A new series where practising artists answer questions about their practice, in dialogue with Judith Glover

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Helen Whittaker, stained glass artist and sculptor,  
Creative Director, Barley Studio, Dunnington, York



Stained glass artist Helen Whittaker

*Can you describe your artistic practice?*

I make stained glass windows and architectural sculpture in glass and copper. I am Creative Director at Barley Studio, which is internationally renowned for both stained glass creation and conservation. Working alongside Managing Director Keith Barley MBE, we have great support from an impressive multi-skilled team of painters, glaziers, conservators, and metalworkers.

My aim in my creative practice is to capture attention and engage the viewer through good design and craftsmanship. My work creates energy and movement, mixing contemporary and traditional elements.

Over the last twenty years I have completed over a hundred commissions for prestigious ecclesiastical and secular buildings across the UK, including All Saints Pavement Church, and the Merchant Taylors Hall here in York.



Helen with the clients and members of the Barley Studio team with her window for the Merchant Taylors Hall, York, 2016

Further afield my work can be seen in the RAF Club and Dulwich College, London; St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny; Beverley Minster; Scarborough Hospital; St Brandon's Church, Brancepeth, Durham; and St Cuthbert's Church, Crayke, North Yorkshire.



HM The Queen at the unveiling of Helen's windows for the RAF Club London, 2018



Helen's prayer tree sculpture for Scarborough Hospital, 2019

*What started you off as an artist?*

Both art and craft were important in my family when I was growing up. I visited galleries and museums on a regular basis with my mum, which meant that I learned about and experienced many different types of art from across the centuries. My dad is the reason why I love making things, as he was a craftsman, from a long line of cabinet-makers and blacksmiths.

My first introduction to stained glass was at the University of Sunderland, where I studied for a BA (Hons) in 3-Dimensional Glass and Ceramics. From there I was awarded a scholarship for the MA course in Visual, Islamic and Traditional Arts at the Prince's School of Architecture in London, where I studied arts and crafts from all around the world, including calligraphy and icon painting.

Whilst I was studying, I also decided to get some work experience in leading stained-glass studios, including Barley Studio in York, where I worked alongside conservator Keith Barley and his team. I joined the team full-time in 1998, and ever since then I have been fortunate to have been creating contemporary stained glass to commission.

*Who or what are your influences?*

As an art student I was excited by pictures that catch and engage your attention – perhaps with a strong narrative or story-telling, through movement and the play of light and dark. Paintings that draw you in, such as the works of Vermeer and Artemisia Gentileschi. I enjoy the simplicity of line and colour in the figurative work of painters such as the early Italian painter Giotto and the 20th century artist Modigliani.

My other love is sculpture, especially the work of Rodin – full of character, realism and feeling, brought to life through the play of light and dark. I also admire the contemporary work of Grayson Perry with its strong narrative drive. In stained glass, I admire the punchy figurative work of Wilhelmina Geddes, and the bold symbolism and dramatic textures of Piper and [Reyntiens](#).

I have been fortunate to learn from some wonderful teachers and collaborators. I have been greatly influenced by my late professor at the Prince's School, Keith Critchlow – an architect, painter and leading expert in sacred geometry and architecture. Keith sought geometry everywhere, from a simple flower to the construction of the finest paintings in history. His teachings have had a vast influence on my thinking and development throughout my career.

At Barley Studio I also learnt the many skills needed in stained glass conservation and restoration, from site work to studio work, with my specialism being restoration painting – which I still practise and oversee today. At the beginning of my career I felt very fortunate to be able to study great works of the past in close detail, such as the complete sixteenth-century glazing scheme at St Mary's Church in Fairford, Gloucestershire. It was an amazing opportunity to look and learn from the great mastery involved in the design and creation of these stunning windows.

I love working collaboratively, and am lucky to have a great team around me. I have had invaluable advice and assistance with my three-dimensional work in copper from the artist and sculptor Harold Gosney. Letterers Charles Smith FRSA and Phil Thomas RSAW have created styles of lettering for several of my windows.

In the past ten years I have had the privilege of working with two Royal Academy painters, David Hockney and Hughie O'Donoghue, both for Westminster Abbey. Hockney's design for The Queen's Window, celebrating her reign through her love of the countryside, was first made on an iPad.



Helen working with David Hockney at his studio in California on *The Queen's Window*, 2018

Hughie O'Donoghue created full-size oil paintings which I translated into glass for the Lady Chapel. The two Marian windows were commissioned and installed to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of HM The Queen's Coronation.

*How would you describe your recent work?*

Ever evolving! I think that the variety of influences I've described above help me to be comfortable working in a wide range of styles. I am led by what I feel the commission demands, be that Geometric, Figurative, Abstract, Symbolic, Representational or Sculptural.



My aim is to create narrative and dialogue to engage people with new ways of telling stories, whether traditional or contemporary. I use abstraction to create layers of movement and meaning, underpinned by geometric principles that integrate the window into its surroundings. I feel that my work is rooted in our ancient craft, but not bound to one particular tradition or style.

At the end of 2019 I was given the opportunity to share my work with a global audience. I was invited to help promote the UK Government's international 'GREAT Britain' campaign to showcase British talent in the creative sector.



Poster for the 'GREAT Britain' campaign featuring Helen's window, St Mary's Church, Sopworth, 2018

Two of my artworks promoting GREAT British Design and Craft are currently featured on posters at Manchester and Gatwick International Airports, as part of this campaign. I was also invited to create an artwork for the deTour Creative Festival, 'East meets West', in Hong Kong and travelled there for the exhibition in late 2019.

*What would you say is the main challenge in your making?*

Most of my work is made to commission, for both secular and ecclesiastical buildings. I enjoy this way of working as each project brings its own set of challenges – for which I have to find a solution.

For every new commission, I examine the history of the building; the architectural space surrounding the window; the purpose of the window within the building (for example, the East Window of a church being the devotional point); the light coming through the window (especially the aspect of the window); the relationship of the window to other works of art in the building; the relationship of the window to the people who use the building; and any structural limitations of the window opening.

The challenge I set myself is to bring all of these elements and ideas together into a unique and unified artwork. I believe that new stained glass windows should be in harmony with their surroundings but should

also speak of today; engaging, even challenging, the viewer and guiding them on an emotional and artistic journey.

*How has this recent period of lockdown affected your practice?*

When the lockdown started, all the lectures, study trips and conferences I had planned were of course cancelled or moved online. However, I am lucky enough to have a large studio space with all the resources I need in house, and so I was able to take the opportunity to focus on a new commission.

The York Diocesan Advisory Council had just granted the Faculty permission for a new window for St Cuthbert's Church in Crayke, North Yorkshire, which had been commissioned by a client who was ill with terminal cancer. I was really pleased that the 'quiet' period of lockdown allowed me the time to complete this commission, so that the client could see it installed in the church.



Helen's window for St Cuthbert's Church, Crayke, 2020

*Do you have a website where our members can find out more about your practice?*

I have two! See [www.helenwhittakerart.com](http://www.helenwhittakerart.com) for my own creative work, and [www.barleystudio.co.uk](http://www.barleystudio.co.uk) for more information about Barley Studio.

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