

# FOCUS

## For ART'S Sake



Esther Lafferty meets Mary Blackshaw, who is showing work featuring her own pigment in Woodstock for Artweeks

EXHIBITING in St Mary Magdalene Church in Woodstock until Sunday, Mary Blackshaw's collage art is underpinned by an age-old alchemy which she uses to create earth and lake pigments, paints, pastels, inks, and dyes for her illustrations.

"My father was a Greek Orthodox iconographer," she explains, "and in iconography, every process, every element of a painting has a symbolic reason including the choice of pigments. I grew up with pigments everywhere. This means that while I always appreciate a beautiful painting, I value those that have real depth of meaning much more."

"My father's pigments came from a shop in London near the British Museum, Cornelissen's which opened in 1855 and is like something from a Harry Potter film. It started me wondering about the origins of each pigment and I became enthralled by the process of making a muddy rock into paint."

"I was especially interested in local pigments. For example, there was an ochre quarry in Shotover and for a period the Wheatley windmill stopped grinding flour and ground the rock from the quarry into a pigment known as Parry's Yellow. In the Ashmolean collection, there's even a William Turner painting of these quarry pits which he painted in 1818."

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Mary began making her own pigments – earth pigments from rocks and lake pigments from plants which however are less light-fast. "If you can make a mark with a rock," she explains, "then you can make a pigment from it. Alternatively, you might use acorns, madder root, or simmer inks from sloes and walnut hulls. There are endless ways to extract pigments from the natural world. I also

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make the pigment bone black by burning bones I found in our allotment and grinding them until fine.

Bone char has been in use since historic times because of its depth of colour and tinting strength. It was used by both old masters like Rembrandt and painters such as Manet. The black dresses and high hats of the gentlemen in Manet's Music in the Tuileries, for example, are painted in ivory black.

"Whenever I travel, I collect different colours from different parts of the country. For Artweeks I'm using these pigments from particular places to illustrate the folklore of the area: the local palette can be quite limited, so it lends itself to an illustrative style. Researching British folklore traditions, it's clear that we live on quite the eccentric little island. There are so many offbeat events that celebrate the spring, or something seasonal, and I really enjoy their eccentricity. I love that the British can be so strait-laced for 364 days of the year and then on the 365th day, a community goes crazy."

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Work by Mary Blackshaw