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Artist in Residence

Artist Sorcha Meek in studio.



Humanity, in Depth & in Miniature

Artist Sorcha Meek uses tea bags to bring beauty to simple life

by Aimee Lyn Brown

photos by Blaine & Bethany Photography

SORCHA MEEK BALANCES ON A PAINT-SPLATTERED STOOL IN FRONT OF A DRAFTING TABLE. On it are small aluminum tubes of oil acrylics, cups of thin paint brushes, dried and flattened tea bags waiting to be prepped into mini-canvases, and endless sheets of paper covered with sketches of landscapes, human figures, trees and birds.

"Art is not limited to any one thing, and there is always more to explore," she says as she gestures at her desk, then at the walls of her studio. There are large canvases covered in bright oils, framed sketches of human figures, and loose pieces of gauze and fabric. "It's about creating opportunities for conversations that contribute to a deeper understanding of our lives and what it means to be human," she adds.

Exploration has widely influenced her life. Born and raised in Ireland, she graduated from California State University Chico with a degree in visual communications. Later she earned a diploma from the Art Institute of Florence, in Italy. She has had nine solo shows and has been a part of more than fifteen group exhibitions in the United States and abroad. She has also founded, or been a founding member, of numerous art education programs and studios, including the Columbia Gorge's Alpinee Art Center. Even with such a résumé, Meek is reluctant to say she has made it as an artist. Instead, she tells visitors at her small studio across the river from her home in Hood River that she has so much more to learn. "I never want to feel like I've arrived," says Meek, who, after two decades working and teaching in the world of contemporary art, is now pursuing a master's of art education at Portland State University.

By working within themes, Meek has created several series of artwork that speak to the similarities of all humans, the importance and relevance of water and the periods of calm amidst the churn of daily life.

In her "Voyage" series, created throughout a year in which she moved with her husband, Barry Paul, and their daughters to Bordeaux, France, Meek crafted large papier mâché sticks from newspapers she found in her family's otherwise empty apartment. She painted them with black and white barber pole stripes, positioned them in prominent locations around the city, then photographed these installations.

One of these images, "Lovers in the Park," which showed the sticks intertwined on a park bench, was selected in 2009 to be part of a national juried show and was displayed with thirty-one other selections at the Axis Gallery in Sacramento, California.

"The series had so much to do with Barry and I finding ourselves in a foreign place, and then going through the process of learning to interact with each other and others in that environment," Meek says.



Meek, who learned to drink tea as a young girl in Ireland, began to repurpose her used tea bags as tiny canvases for fine art.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: From the "Lindy" series, oil on canvas; Teabag painted for the "Together" series; The artist with her palette of paint.



In using the French newspapers, and the flour and water that are the primary ingredients of the French baguette to make the m \acute{a} ch \acute{e} sticks, Meek says she found symbolism of her family's arrival and stay in Bordeaux. "We arrived with very little and had to find our way with each other and with what we had."

Meek, who learned to drink tea as a young girl in Ireland, began to repurpose her used tea bags as tiny canvases for fine art. With a tapered brush she painted French verbs in calligraphy on the bags. Grouped together, the teabags became a diary of her visit to Bordeaux. When she returned to Hood River, she continued to use teabags as a medium, creating the series, "Together," featuring tiny snapshots of landscapes grouped together and presented in black shadowboxes.

"I wanted to invoke a feeling, convey an experience," Meek says of the series. "I also wanted to make work that was affordable yet filled with beauty and meaning."

The creation of artwork that is both aesthetically pleasing and message-driven is a hallmark of Meek's career. Her series, "Being Human," showcases figure drawings of all shapes and sizes and served to illustrate that when everything else is stripped away and humans are left standing naked and alone, they are more similar than different. The pieces were influenced by her childhood in Ireland and the ongoing violent conflict between the Protestants and Catholics.

"Water is Life," is a series of vibrant oil paintings and monotypes. "Water has always played a large role in my life," says Meek. "The whole idea of the series was to convey that we are mostly water, and to bring awareness to the importance of water for all life."

Then there are the farm pieces. In 2006, Meek presented "Facing Change" at the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington. The series became part of an exhibition titled, "Sustaining Change on the American Farm: An Artist-Farmer Exchange." Meek was one of twelve artists from the Pacific Northwest to be invited to present. Her participation included a stay on a 1,000-acre working onion farm in Ontario, Oregon. The experience spurred her creation of ten new pieces.

"Being commissioned for the exhibit provided me the freedom to truly express myself," says Meek. "I was free to create without having to conform to ideas of salability."

The artist used sienna-toned oils to paint farm scenes onto old onion bags coated with gesso and sewn onto canvas with horsehair. Much like the music of Ireland, this art told the story of the land, the people and changing practices within agriculture.

"Beauty comes in so many different forms," Meek observes. "Being able to see beauty on the farm, in everyday life and in simple things within nature is incredibly important." ■

See more of Sorcha Meek's work at sorchameek.com