

Michael Winterbottom interviews Architectural and stained glass artist Mel Howse

In this last twelve months Mel Howes, has completed some unusual and unique ecclesiastical artwork. Each commission using glass in new and exciting ways within church architecture.

She was recently commissioned by Christian Aid to create a sculpture for their *Poverty Over* campaign, a dramatic piece in enamelled steel.

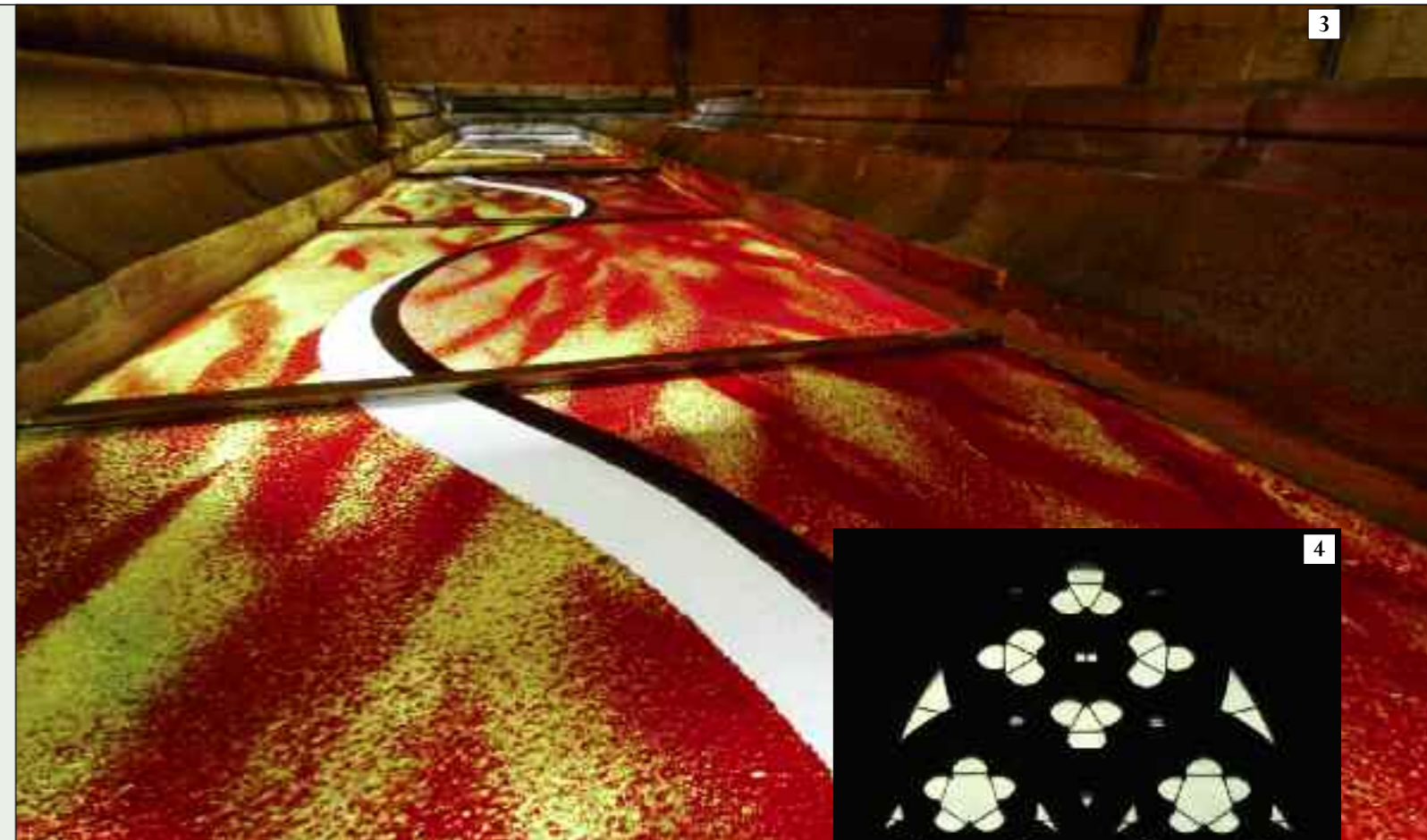
It was created for the *Poverty Over Touring Exhibition* and on Monday January 17 the tour was launched

at Southwark Cathedral with a speech from Loretta Minghella the charity's director. The sculpture was sponsored by the wife of the late Edward England, the publisher who was responsible for bringing the New International Bible to Britain. The exhibition has been organised by Canon Geoffrey Daintree, and will tour cathedrals throughout 2011 and 2012 to raise awareness that poverty can be eradicated.

Mel told *Church Building & Heritage Review*, "It's not often that a piece of art gets the opportunity to appear in so many cathedral locations."

She went on to say, "The key to the design of my sculpture is the juxtaposition of two huge spun steel bowls (each approx 1.2m diameter), the interiors of which represent two human eyes inside out. The surreal and evocative piece draws in the viewer with its conspicuous elevated eye which represents society's conscience. Only as one approaches can one see and feel the second eye, looking up from the deep interior of the second bowl, this is the eye of poverty.

The piece explores those looking up from the bottom of the poverty trap, and those looking out from the privileged world, an unbalanced arrangement. At first glance the forms are simply two eyes, but look for longer and the surface is a complex web of fired enamel. Overall the piece stands 2.2m tall." >42





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- 1> *Christian Aid: The Poverty Over Sculpture*
The Eye of Society (vitreous enamels on steel)
- 2> *Poverty Over sculpture* at Southwark Cathedral
- 3> *Hurstpierpoint Chapel: The North Transept Window*
The design on the glass curves its way towards the apex of the window
- 4> "Fire & Water" – kiln formed and enamelled glass

Then in November she installed a very contemporary 20m² window at Hurstpierpoint College Chapel. Entitled 'Fire & Water,' it portrays two significant elemental Christian symbols together. It is a progressive work created in panels of enamelled and kiln formed glass, and it holds the light during the day like traditional stained glass cannot. It makes a big impact on the imposing scale of the chapel. Entrepreneur John Taysom, who was himself a pupil at the college, donated the project. In Mel's words, "the fiery design aims to wear Christianity on its sleeve, reflecting the faith, spirit and vitality of the College."

Then the Grace and Compassion Benedictine sisters commissioned her to design for their private chapel in Brighton. This is a unified and complete collection of spiritual glasswork, created for their modern new-build chapel designed by Peter Pritchett of John D. Clarke Architects. The art

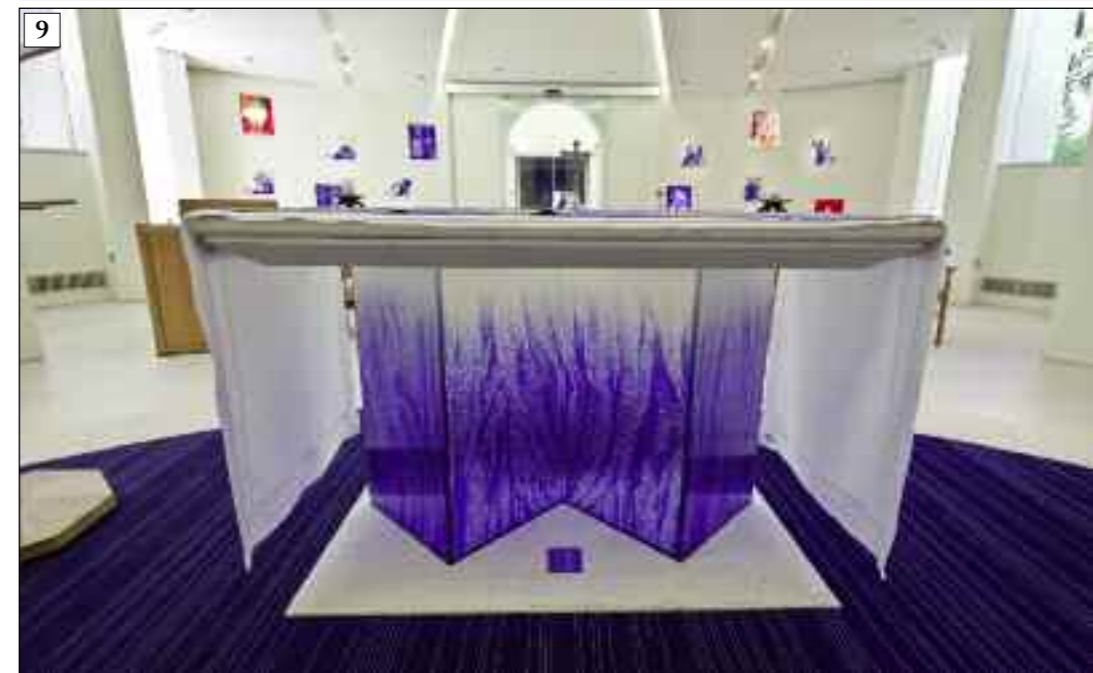
encompassed: fourteen very unusual stations of the cross in jet cut and enamelled glass, six etched west windows created from single pieces of hand blown glass, a reredos and a stunning glass altar. As an artist Mel felt that to be commissioned to design for a complete building was indeed a very special opportunity, especially as the architect had conceived the building as a complete work with the art integral to it.

Then to crown an already busy year 2010 saw Mel receive a Sussex Heritage Trust Building Crafts Award for her carved glass doors which are installed at the West entrance of St. Nicholas' Church in Arundel, as part of a reordering by architect Jane Jones Warner. This, as well as being a very functional piece of artwork, is, in Mel's words, "a diaphanous, sensitive and subtle installation. It uses clear toughened glass, and bespoke polished steel ironmongery – yet the

- 5> *St Nicholas Arundel: The West Entrance doors*
Art & functionality that cares for the historic setting
- 6> "Detail from carved polished and toughened art glass doors"
- 7> Traditional and contemporary materials resting comfortably together
- 8> *St. Benedict's Chapel for The Grace And Compassion Benedictines*
Looking east towards the altar
- 9> Looking towards the west doors: the glass altar, west windows and stations
- 10> Station 7 "Jesus Falls for the Second Time"



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surface texture of the carved and polished design clothes the entrance as well as caring for the beautiful and tactile vista of the interior of this ancient building."

In summing up and exciting twelve months she told me, "You've probably gathered from the above descriptions that as an artist I am interested in using glass and the materials I work with in new and exciting ways. Despite this my ecclesiastical portfolio is an amalgamation of projects for both new-build and ancient buildings. This is an exciting challenge where every artwork is invigorated by the experience gained by the whole. Working closely with clients and architects is also an essential, enjoyable and healthy part of the work.

I believe that where artwork is commissioned to speak to people, to convey a message, or have functional reason for being, art can thrive. So for me spiritual work fits this need perfectly. ■