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INTERIORS ART

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Artist spreads his wings

Words Gina Benjamin

Michael Olsen's art is a true flight of the imagination. Hundreds of butterflies flit across his specially designed acrylic frames — mostly in an abstract pattern, although a recent design was the silhouette of a man with butterflies streaming away inside. Inspiration arrived seven years ago, when Michael's youngest son, Jeremy, came across a Victorian case of real butterflies on eBay.

They wondered if they could put a modern slant on the look — without real lepidoptera. The Olsen version uses hand-painted butterflies made of feathers and attached to wires, displayed in the acrylic boxes.

"With each case comes a centre panel, so it's like a sandwich," says Michael. "Top slice, bottom slice and in between a 'cheese' slice — a single panel with up to 400 holes, laser-cut." Michael is something of a sandwich expert, as at one stage he owned a coffee shop (he has had several other careers, of which more later). In the café, he channelled his

creativity into "learning how to make a damn good sandwich and a reasonable cappuccino".

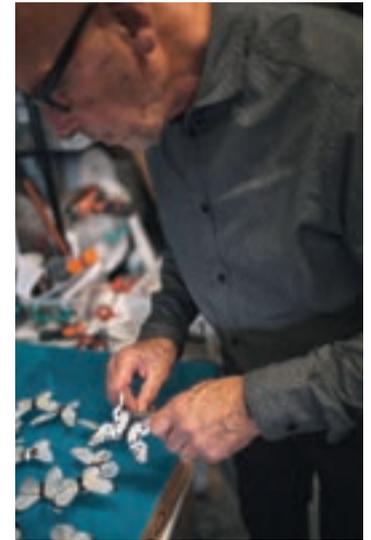
In the butterfly sandwiches, the mayo is a soft-set glue, into which the butterflies are fixed. "We decide on a colour palette, depending on how we feel and whether we have had a specific request from client," says Michael, who now works with an assistant, Talia Singer, as Jeremy has left to pursue other projects. "We poke the wires into the holes and make up the jigsaw puzzle, seeing how well the colours meld."

Once that stage is complete, the

panel is given a powerful blast of air, to ensure everything is firmly fixed; all traces of glue or grease are removed and the wires are trimmed to suit the depth of box, although some ends may be left to create interesting shadowy effects.

Usually the panels are left overnight and checked again before fixing them into the acrylic box. They are treated with an anti-static gun and any dust is vacuumed out. Then the box is ready to be closed. A large work of, say, 1.1m x 90cm would take about a week to build.

The art is sold through a network



of about 30 art gallery partners and through Olsen's website.

This artistic creativity offers a new outlet for 73-year-old Olsen's business experience and deftness of handiwork. His most recent job, until becoming a full-time artist in 2017, was as a handyman, carrying out repairs, painting, decorating, tiling and plumbing. It is now not unusual for him to work seven days a week on his art. But Olsen was originally a chemist to the stars. His first business, in Chelsea, was the Markham Pharmacy. It served the local community—including Marianne Faithful, Mark Bolan, Liberace, Margaret Thatcher and Lady Olivier.

"That was a very exciting time, from around 1969," he says. "We lived above the shop, originally a Mary Quant boutique, and we stayed open until ten at night. We had meals sent up from the restaurant

'THE WORKS BRING THE BEAUTY OF A SUMMER MEADOW INTO YOUR ROOM'

underneath, which was owned by Mary Quant's husband."

He sold his chemist shops in 1988 and opened a chain of pet stores (precursors to today's pet superstores), subsequently becoming a business advisor, working for veterinary group and opening the café.

Since becoming a butterfly artist, Olsen's interest in the insects has "skyrocketed" and he hopes to create some pieces focusing on wildlife conservation, using a distinctive style to illustrate the reduction in wildlife habitats.

"People love butterflies," he says. "When my work was shown at the Chester Art Fair recently, the customer reaction was so encouraging—they really make people smile."

"The works convey the beauty of nature, as well as a simple spirit-lifting splash of colour. They bring the beauty of a meadow in summer into your living room. I have dipped my toe into making an aquatic installation in a similar way but it hasn't taken off in the same way as the butterflies."

There were not many summer meadows where Olsen grew up. Born in Stoke Newington, he lived there until the age of nine, when

Olsen (opposite and top right) assembles his butterfly creations with the same dexterity as he would make the perfect sandwich

► CONTINUED ON P14



Flow
Delicate creatures
form shapes
and shoals



◀ CONTINUED FROM P13

he moved to Preston Road, Wembley. His was a traditional Jewish family, “moderately observant” and he had his barmitzvah at Wembley Synagogue. He still sees some of the good friends he made at Wembley Youth Club.

He married his first wife, Penny, when she was 20 and he was 24 and they moved to Swiss Cottage in 1971, where their sons were born — Giles, Oliver, Jeremy. All are now married and Michael has six grandchildren —

two granddaughters have butterfly installation in their bedrooms.

Olsen remains sporty to this day. He has run three marathons and used to play tennis four or five times a week and now he swims and cycles. He has been married to his second wife, Debra, for ten years now and they live in Stanmore, where he has a butterfly installation, of course.

“I recently changed it,” says Olsen. “I put two panels in — instead of one slice of cheese, it has two. One at the back has all white butterflies — and the colour comes from the ones in

front that are more sparsely populated. When my grandson, Jack was barmitzvah last year I gave my son

‘MY WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN AN ADVENTURE AND, AT 73, THE FUN HASN’T STOPPED’

and his wife one of my installations, measuring 1.8m and 80cm deep. It is a riot of colour and consists of 700 to 800 butterflies of sizes from

2cm across to about 15cm.” Olsen makes four basic sizes — 50x50cm; 75x75cm; 100x100cm and 110x90cm (landscape or portrait). The butterflies vary widely in size — when I speak to Olsen, he has one measuring 4.5cm to hand and one of 12cm but there are smaller and larger ones. Special commissions are also undertaken and the price depends on specification. “The biggest one we ever had was 2m x 1.5m, which was bought by an NHS Hospital trust. They auctioned it at the Savoy; it sold for £13,000.

“I get a huge amount of pleasure out of making these things and dealing with the public,” says Olsen. “Apart from the artistic side, there’s a lot of pleasure in problem-solving and getting processes streamlined. I keep trying to improve things. My whole life has been an adventure and at 73 years of age the fun and wonder hasn’t stopped.”

To contact Michael about his work or commission a piece, email michael.olsen@butterflyart.co.uk or see butterflyart.co.uk