



Naturally Inspired | *Melissa Cole*

How many artists do you know who are thrilled by a face-to-face encounter with a 23-foot-long anaconda underwater in the Amazon, or by swimming alongside the world's largest species of shark? Artist Melissa Cole has been inspired to create artwork based on these experiences as well as many more. Her adventures began at an early age. Melissa was raised in London, Hong Kong and Mumbai by a commercial airline pilot father and an artistic mother. Creating artwork has always been a natural part of life for her. She remembers a home filled with creative materials such as clay, crayons and paints. Her mother was an oil painter and watercolorist. Melissa's

childhood was relatively carefree, and she spent the days attending school, making art, and playing with the local children- on beaches, community lawns and secretly, even within the nearby slums of Mumbai. When people asked her what she was going to be when she grew up, Melissa answered, "a marine biologist."

She graduated from Oregon State University with a degree in zoology and marine ecology. After university, she worked in the Dominican Republic as a Peace Corps volunteer in reforestation and environmental education. During these years, Melissa incorporated the

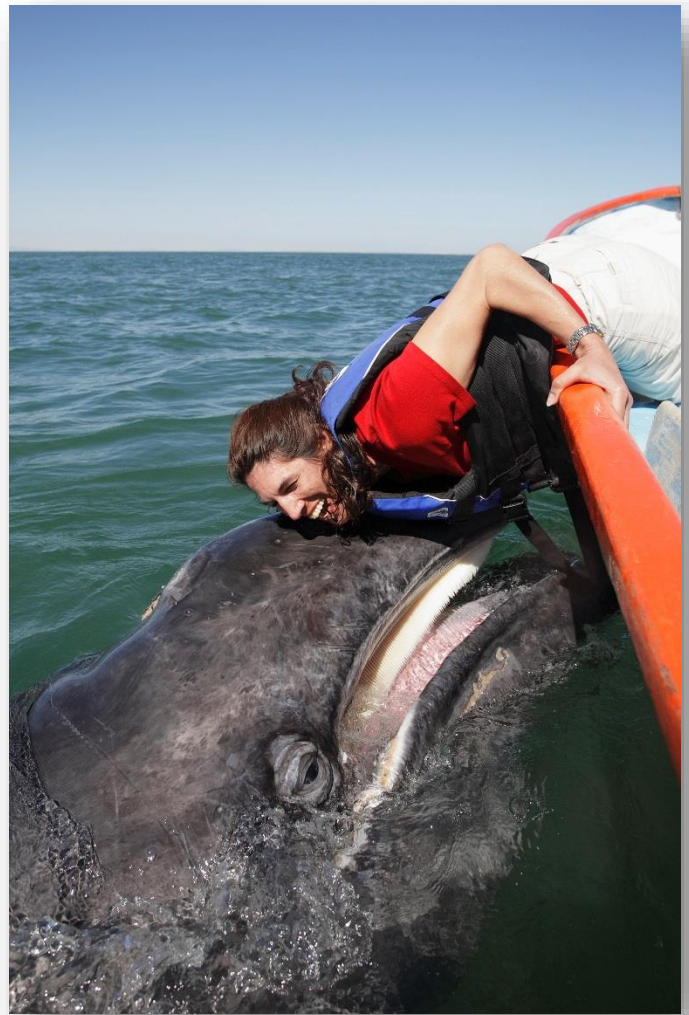
creation of artwork into her everyday life. She painted large educational murals in schools and carved intricate designs onto gourds in her spare time. She was fortunate enough to work in a village of artisans and basket weavers. This experience of creating artwork within a community showed Melissa what a powerful force art has on people, breaking down cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers. She now uses this knowledge in her large installations and public works.

After completing her two-year commitment with the Peace Corps, Melissa worked in the scuba diving industry as a divemaster in St. Croix, USVI. When she wasn't guiding tours along the coral reefs, she used the entire dive shop as a canvas, painting a large-scale mural of Caribbean sea creatures.

In Baja Mexico, Melissa worked as a naturalist bilingual guide, taking people out to see the gray whales in Magdalena Bay and San Ignacio Lagoon. In Mexico, Melissa met her marine photographer husband, Brandon Cole.

One year later, they were married in the Seychelles Islands and began their new life together in Spokane, WA.

It was in Spokane that Melissa began her career as an artist. She read Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, completing its various exercises in art and creativity. Her husband encouraged her to follow her artistic inclinations. She worked in watercolor and gouache and soon began creating designs for greeting cards and labels for a neighborhood coffee company.



She exhibited her work in local cafes, restaurants and galleries. She bought herself *Art Marketing 101* to help her navigate the art world, as this wasn't a career she had ever considered!

Over the last twenty years, Melissa has developed her skill set in a variety of mediums by working one on one with many different artists experienced in their field. Currently, her primary medium is acrylic paint on wood with fused glass and stone accents. The fused glass tile could be created by a group of women she met in India, from a trip to Murano, Italy or from her own kiln. Stones are gathered with her mother along the Oregon coast or on a wild red

bluff in Tasmania. She melds her ingredients to form a multicultural medley inspired by her travels and life experience.

Melissa is also skilled in encaustic painting, as well as ceramic, bronze and concrete sculpture with glass mosaic.

Her public work *Confluence*, a pedestrian bridge over 100 feet long, won the juror's choice award at the International Mosaic Exhibition in Houston, TX.



It is from these remarkable encounters that she derives much of the inspiration for her vividly colored, heavily textured and patterned paintings and sculptures. She is strongly influenced by folkloric designs and global patterns found in ceramics, batiks, sculptures and mosaics that she sees in her travels abroad. Melissa's artwork strives to bring themes of science and the natural realm to urban settings, encouraging people to reconnect with nature.

She travels and dives extensively with her husband Brandon, who specializes in photographing whales, dolphins, sharks and general marine life. On these trips Melissa assists her husband as a model, critter scout, camera caddy and safety partner.



Her creations are showcased in national galleries, corporate and private collections, aquariums, hospitals, schools, parks and many other public places.



One collector described her work as “jewels for walls.” Another said, “Melissa’s art pieces have added brightness and cheer to our home. It is the first thing that is noticed on entering. The pieces never get old; I feel that every time I look at them, I look at them for the first time. The myriad colors and textures refract ordinary light and give them a chameleon-like quality; ever changing, always new.”

Melissa enjoys creating mixed media paintings. She juxtaposes swirling textures with smooth washes of color then adds a pop of dimension with iridescent fused glass pieces.

She continually seeks to capture the expressive movement and raw energy she sees in nature.



In addition to gallery exhibitions throughout the United States and overseas in England and India, Melissa has been commissioned to create numerous public works of art from benches to bridges!

She is passionate about involving the public in the art process through community-built mosaic works of art, which instill a sense of pride and ownership. She has a natural rapport with children and an ability to enthusiastically mentor them.



Her recent public project *Inspiration and Pollination*, permanently installed at the Moscow Public Library in Idaho, engaged

more than 125 multigenerational community participants.

While creating work together, they explored the role of pollinators in the ecosystem and learned about important native plants. During the weeklong installation of this mosaic, hundreds of people stopped by to thank her and view the impact of their individual contributions to the whole. The entire experience was transformational.



Themes of love, diversity, social equality, and science are also woven into Melissa's work. Her recent exhibition *Cellular* revisited her studies in organismal biology. Her subjects ranged from human T-cells attacking cancer tumors to marine plankton. She continues to explore the fusion of art and science.

She finds experimenting with scientific subject matter exciting, and who knows where this will lead her next!

