

ELIZABETH HANNAFORD

Elizabeth Hannford

Legal Artist

By Elizabeth Cruickshank

After a career in the law and a period undergoing artistic training Elizabeth Hannaford spent six years helping to run Studio Upstairs, a small charity which provides studio and performance space for people with mental health problems, while at the same time developing her own painting skills. But it was not until she was asked to be a trustee of the charity that she was able to acknowledge her true vocation. "It was then that I realised that I was an artist," she said simply. "Being a trustee would take too much time and so I realised that I had to leave. Too much of my life up to that point had been spent not painting."

Let's set the scene

Elizabeth Hannaford works in a set of artists studios in Bermondsey up 5 flights of noisy clanging metal stairs that open from dinginess into a light-filled white-walled room with Thirties metal frames and a tantalising view of rooftops beyond. Her pictures, many of them stacked against the wall are each of limited colour palette, but each exists in its own part of the colour spectrum. Warm colours or the cool blue white of her Icelandic 4 series scarred with flashes of deep cerulean blue, the depths of crevasse snow that has lain for some time. "I'm interested in the cause of things not merely in their appearance."

Her studio is furnished with two trestle tables, an inadequate heater, a kettle and the accoutrements of hot drinks recalling lawyerly hospitality, tea, and coffee, decaffeinated or full strength. Her paintings are stacked against the walls, finished products with only two major works on display, both already spoken for, one of them about to leave for Germany.

Rangy in jeans and warm sheepskins, she is articulate with powerful hands that punctuate her conversation. "This is only the first interview I have given," she says until she remembers that "long ago I went to Australia on business and was sent off to a small town to interview people about maternity policy. I got off the train to be met with a battery of cameras, because I was that very rare creature, a young female lawyer in a mini-skirt."



The Million Dollar Question

Elizabeth is very reflective about her work, her reason for being an artist and the practice of creativity. I wonder whether it is possible to make a living from art? How does the act of creation meld with the cold reality of getting hard cash for your personal interpretation of the world around you?

"I love having my work shown. But as an artist you must sell, sell, sell. And I hate selling. Not just the physical act but actually parting with my work because it no longer belongs to me. Someone takes it away. Some artists don't have that feeling of loss. Howard Hodgkin took the view that his paintings must look after themselves, that his work had its own existence." And then she adds paradoxically, "It's painful sometimes to hand my work over, but it is not painful to hear what other people say about it."

"Most artists find pricing and selling a very difficult activity. But you have to learn to take rejection and just get up and try again and again and again. In fact it is easier when you have done something else with your life because you have that to fall back on."

Becoming and being a lawyer

In her case 'the something' was the practice of Law. The obvious question is why did she leave, or perhaps why, if she really was an artist, did she become a lawyer in the first place?

The first is easily answered. With clear candour Elizabeth reflects that it was inevitable that she would fall into something that ensured a secure living. Having been left with nothing by a feckless husband and little by way of work skills, Elizabeth's mother was desperate that her daughter would not find herself in the same position. So, Elizabeth put development of her artistic talent on hold and trained as a solicitor.

For many years she enjoyed the Law, working in a High Street

practice in Muswell Hill. "There was a big workload in working in a North London suburban practice in a climate of competitive conveyancing, but I was good with clients and enjoyed it all. I must admit I got a thrill out of it." And clearly success as well, for after a short time she became a partner. This latter piece of information she throws out nonchalantly as though it were just another O level.

"I enjoyed the status and intellectual stimulation, and I felt a bit special. I don't regret doing Law at all. The discipline of my profession is in my work now." Certainly she has not dissuaded her children from following her in either profession. One of her children is a lawyer and the other is a graphic designer. How even-handed is that?

However she acknowledges that if she had not needed the structure of certain income to create balance in the past, she would have gone into art sooner. "I'm not good at hopping from one thing to another. Once I start something I am absolutely absorbed (Her hands come forward in front of her face to indicate tunnel vision.) and I want to finish it. So maybe it would have been difficult for me to continue art and have children. And that would have been a loss, because you know bringing up children is a creative act in itself."

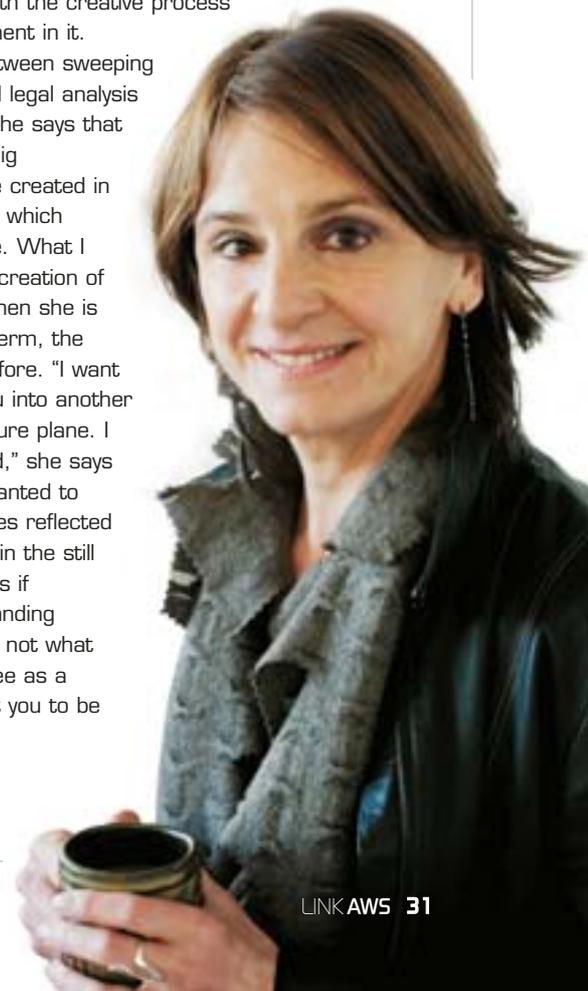
The implication that hangs in the air is that it is easier to be a mother and a lawyer than a mother and an artist.

Cross-over skills

Discipline and attention to detail she considers necessary for the successful practice of both professions. Added to that Elizabeth possesses a remarkable ability not only to look intently at the world around her and to transmit in paint what she sees, but also to explain both the creative process and her own involvement in it.

Switching easily between sweeping artistic hyperbole and legal analysis of her descriptions, she says that she loves to depict "big landscapes which are created in a series of canvases, which overlap and juxtapose. What I am interested in the creation of illusionary space." When she is asked to define this term, the lawyer comes to the fore. "I want to be able to take you into another world from a flat picture plane. I had a trip to Scotland," she says simply, "and what I wanted to show were the hillsides reflected at 45 degree angles in the still waters of the lochs as if approached from a landing aeroplane. It's maybe not what most people would see as a landscape, but I want you to be drawn in."

Another inspiration was a trip to Iceland, "a country of raw



ugly beauty. It takes years and years for the moss on the vast lava fields to start growing there. I looked into a glacial lagoon at the end of a glacier and I saw in the fissures a blue of an ethereal intensity that you can't get in freshly fallen snow." She is enraptured by the thought of a snow colour that can only be obtained by the build up of snow over decades and perhaps centuries.

The discipline of art

She is also very conscious that her pictures are "just objects" Even in her series where one picture appears to flow into the next to create one whole, she often leaves a gap in the hanging or in the way that one picture ends and another begins. "I want you to be able to say, once you have been drawn into the picture, "But it's just canvas and paint." The gaps in my pictures emphasise that."

Elizabeth's pictures are not 'easy'. They are not small watercolours or studio portraits. Although their provenance in reality is not immediately discernible, Elizabeth does not see herself as a particularly avant-garde artist. "I find myself looking back and redirecting historical tradition rather than criticising it. All I really want to do is to paint and to go on painting, and what I am doing is really pushing oil on canvas."

"Whatever it looks like I don't actually see my work as being very abstract. If mine seems that way it will be because of the subject matter not because I set out to be An Abstract Artist. This is particularly true of my



another I have to be satisfied with it. Quite nice isn't good enough. Usually I know when I've finished," the process of creation, assessment and amendment can leave her physically exhausted at the end of a working day.

Compare and contrast

What does she miss most about the Law? Without a moment's hesitation she says simply. "Power dressing." At that moment she is dressed in paint splattered jeans and several sweaters as an antidote to the chilled January air of her studio which is only barely relieved by the simple two bar electric fire and the hot coffees that we have been swigging. "I've always loved clothes. At University I did a course in modelling, and I found that in one day I could earn as much as I could in a whole week of waitressing."

The big difference between being a lawyer and being an artist is that every time "I come into the studio I feel a wave of relief." This is not because of an instinctive desire to be isolated because being an artist is not she opines, a lonely existence. "I have a nice set-up here with other artists." Shortly the site will be re-developed and she will be moving to Peckham to another set of studios owned by ACME, a charity which provides accommodation for artists. A condition of the planning permission for the Bermondsey site is the building of a new studio block to be leased to ACME at less than the cost price. Presumably this is just the sort of deal that Elizabeth Hannaford, Solicitor, would have enjoyed negotiating.

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music paintings which are necessarily abstract because how else can you convey the experience of listening to a piece of music?"

The search to reproduce that unusual deep blue of the glacier will result in a picture which focuses on that blue and where the rest of the landscape is subsidiary; that is the abstraction. "And abstraction comes from the attempt to communicate visually more than the visual experience, for example how the wind feels in your hair when you're standing in open countryside." This refinement of perception comes from a natural dedication to study and learning. Although she now very rarely paints the human form, she did in fact spend four years studying the moving human form, enabled to do this by working two and a half days a week at Bates, Wells and Braithwaite and studying part-time at the Camden Institute in Kentish Town where she had very good teachers.

Elizabeth's way of working is physically as well as creatively demanding. She sets out her canvases on the floor; because working with thin glazes requires the canvases to be horizontal to avoid the paint dripping downwards in unintended streaks. "Then I have to hang the canvas on the wall, have a look at it, and then take it off again to make adjustments." The individual glazes are so thin that they can take days to dry and so the process of completing a painting can take a long time. Although canvas itself is light the large canvases which are mounted on substantial deep stretchers are heavy and awkward so that moving them requires strength and concentration. As her sense of perfection requires that "when I move from one work to

The connection with the Law is still maintained through the destination of some of her work. As well as hanging in private collections worldwide her work has been displayed at Collyer Bristow and purchased by Mayer, Brown, Rowe and Mawe who have one of her large triptychs in their Reception area.

"Lawyers do love art," she smiles; or do they just recognise a good investment when they see one?

Coda

Afterwards she drove me back to Tower Bridge, both of us shivering from the cold of inactivity on one of the coldest mornings in January, but still discussing the philosophy of art. We agree that writing and painting are different because while you can alter what you have written you can at the same time keep the original, but when you have put your ideas on a canvas, "you have to step back and decide whether you want to take another risk because to move forward with a painting and change it you have to destroy at least some of what you've done. You know Francis Bacon reckoned that he had destroyed some of his best paintings."

She went back to paint "I'll soon be warm. Painting is actually quite physical." I walked briskly for a mile through the bustling City that she had left and I was re-joining before my fingers and toes came back to life.

If you would like to learn more about Elizabeth Hannaford's work, then visit her web-site at www.elizabethhannaford.com Elizabeth is represented by Cork Street gallery, Art First (9 Cork Street, London W1S 3LL at www.artfirst.co.uk)