



THE ART OF *simplicity*

Drawn towards the beauty and natural forms of the countryside and coastline, artist Elaine Pamphilon creates vibrant naive paintings that evoke a sense of serenity

WORDS BY SUSY SMITH • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

Pass by painter Elaine Pamphilon's Cambridgeshire home in the early morning and you might just catch a glimpse of her searching for inspiration. She often pauses by a windowsill to peruse the treasures arranged along it or stops to lift a piece of china from a mantelpiece – usually a favourite mug or bowl – to become the main component in her next picture. Then she will select one or two more items: a pebble, perhaps, a feather, a shell or something more exotic, such as a skein of embroidery silk or a bright Chinese teapot. "I often wander around the house to see what I fancy painting," she explains. Elaine is quite happy to depict the same things over and over again, sometimes up to 20 times. Study her still-lives and you will see certain elements appear and reappear. "The different shapes intrigue me," she says. ➔

countryliving.co.uk



OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE Still-life paintings such as *Let Me Tell You About This Morning* (opposite) are inspired by everyday events, such as picking flowers on a daily walk, as well as beautiful objects in her own home

countryliving.co.uk



TOP Her landscape paintings, including *Nature Reserve*, *Fulbourn* and *Brilliant Day*, *Clodgy Point*, display her fascination with colour and light

the visual arts but music. Both her parents were professional violinists and her brother a chorister at Westminster Abbey. She, too, trained from an early age and, after graduating from the Royal Academy of Music, worked as a harpist, playing regular concerts and performing for eight hours a day. When her first husband, John, died of leukaemia aged 33, leaving her with three young children, Elaine had little choice but to rethink her career and pursue something that would fit in better around her family. In 1989, she met and married sculptor Christopher Marvell, who encouraged her to apply her artistic sensibilities to painting.

The living and working relationship that has developed between the two over the years is vital to both for their creative thought processes and productivity – they constantly consult and advise each other, and often exhibit together. They share their home and studio space in Cambridgeshire and also in a cottage in St Ives in Cornwall, where they go for part of the year to draw on a different atmosphere and visual stimulation.

Whether in the countryside or by the coast, their walk is a vital part of every day. They look at the nature around them: the rise and fall of a green woodpecker in flight, the circling of barn owls at dusk, the rush and flurry of finches, sparrows and warblers from the overgrown, narrow hedgerows. While strolling, they talk about colours and light, puzzle over why something might not be working and memorise shapes and hues for use at a later date. Elaine carries a notebook with her to make quick drawings of the line of a path or the contour of a hill, while also recording her feelings about being in that place. And she always returns with a handful of carefully chosen wild flowers and grasses, which, placed in a mug, will become the focus of her next painting.

Back in the studio, Elaine starts to develop the images. As with her still-lives, she can depict the same view of the nature reserve near their home in Cambridge or the coastline in Cornwall many times, but using a slightly



Elaine carries a notebook on walks to draw the line of a path or the contour of a hill

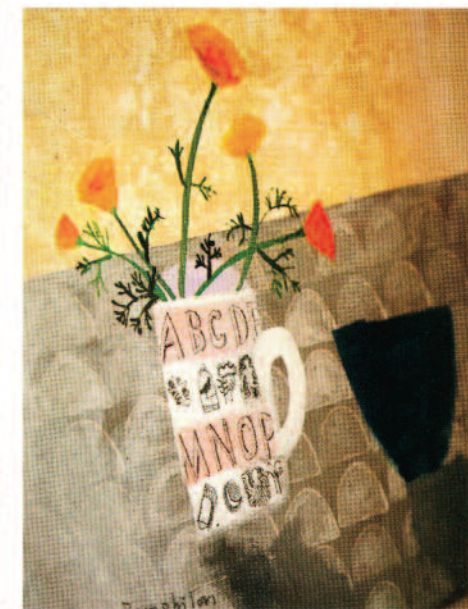
"even though I know each piece really well – I might love the handle or the top of the rim. But every time I paint it, I'll slightly adjust the colour and background. Maybe it will be the centre of the picture or the next time be half hidden."

Elaine's style is naive and simple – she does not try to make the objects appear three-dimensional but her pieces have a distinctive graphic beauty that draws the eye. This approach was driven, she explains, by circumstance rather than any grand artistic plans: "When I first started out, my children were young and I didn't have much time, so I needed a medium that would give me speed. Because acrylic paint dries quickly, I developed a look that wasn't complicated." It has served her well. Her work is instantly recognisable – though often emulated – and she makes a good living from it. Surprisingly, Elaine's creativity first manifested itself in not

different emphasis on an outcrop of rocks or copse of trees. "Sometimes everything flows naturally and I can complete a picture in a morning," she says, "but I might struggle with others for days. Months later, I will examine a piece again and often find a way to make it work by taking something out or altering a shade."

The shelves in her studio are stacked high with boxes, jars and vintage tins filled with artist's accoutrements and myriad tubes of acrylic paint. Unfinished artworks lean against the plan chest waiting for the moment when Elaine feels inspired to revisit them, but all this industriousness is balanced by the plain white walls and tall French windows that open to the garden. These instil a sense of calm as Elaine works quietly, gradually building up the colour and detail on the canvas or board on her easel. Despite the

PROFILE



THIS PAGE Recurring elements in Elaine's paintings are letters and words, including her signature: "I like the actual physical writing of the text and it provides another visual element"



fact that her pieces look simple, the process is not: "It often takes me several attempts," she says, "adding a line, wiping it off again, until it is exactly right."

Both Elaine and Christopher relate to the British painters of the 1940s and 50s such as Ben Nicholson, Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, and one of the couple's earliest and continuing influences is the gallery and house at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge. They knew Jim Ede, the collector and former director of the Tate gallery, who created the space from a row of cottages in 1956. "He told us about all the artists he had known, including Alfred Wallis and the art community in St Ives, and that first inspired us to go there."

Elaine often visits Kettle's Yard to soak up the unique spirit of the place, which is still laid out very much as Jim left it. It's easy to see how the considered arrangements of ordinary, everyday objects there have influenced her still-lives. "It's the sense of stillness and calm that I like, and the chance it gives me to reflect," she says. "I often sit down in one of the rooms and think, 'I love the pattern on that cup,' for instance – and that's the inspiration for my next painting right there in front of me."

Her style is naive, with a distinctive graphic beauty that draws the eye

1 Visit elainepamphilon.com for more examples of her work. She will be exhibiting at the Adam Gallery in London and Bath in October and November (adamgallery.com).