

Sculpting Rocky Landscapes from Weightless Paper

by Susan Van Dongen

The mountains have always been magical to landscape artist and collagist Anne Elliott. Geological phenomena like the Grand Canyon have fired her imagination ever since she was a child growing up near Pittsburgh. In fact, it was at a private elementary school, the Valley School, in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, where she really got hooked. The school was in the mountains east of Pittsburgh and one of its attractions for the young Elliott was a huge buttress of rocks riddled with caves, a labyrinth of secret passages. The school used its beautiful natural surroundings to encourage play and exploration—get wet, get lost, discover something. “I am still in love with rocks and caves,” says Elliott.

Trips to admire geological wonders have taken her around the world, to higher and higher altitudes, even as far as the base camp at K2 in Pakistan. The Lawrence resident has often tried to recreate the feeling of her experiences through her artwork and it was a journey to China in September, 2006, that inspired the artist’s solo show, “Immortal Mountains, Hallowed Caves,” on view at the Pennington School’s Silva Gallery through Thursday, February 5. The exhibit features sculptural and abstract landscapes made from rice paper.

Elliott was particularly inspired by the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, an oasis along the Silk Road. The caves, she says, are actually shrines cut by anonymous sculptors into living rock and they contain thousands of Buddhist frescoes and statues, the product of centuries, even millennia, of devotion and inspiration.

Elliott also traveled to the 36 peaks of Huangshan, Yellow Mountain, southwest of Shanghai. She says she was awestruck by the seemingly endless stone steps and paths that wind through rock, crag, and mist. She describes actually being in the clouds, standing on one peak and looking out at the other three dozen. The feeling was like being in a Chinese landscape painting.

“Of course, the Chinese have to name every single peak,” she says, “as well as every single rock and

every single tree. Even the names have inspired me. When I was in China before, we went to the Summer Palace outside of Beijing. They had all these pavilions and every one had its own name. I came to ‘A Pavilion for Listening to Orioles,’ and I thought, ‘this is wonderful.’ When I came back, I did a whole series on listening to orioles.”

Elliott is not sure which side of her family possessed the artistic gene, but the passion for planning and building things might have come from her father, an engineer and president of the Elliott Corporation, which manufactured power equipment (and still does, although her family is not connected with it anymore.) Elliott’s mother was a

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stay-at-home mom who also oversaw the garden, landscaping, and woods around their house. “Every spring it was like paradise,” she says. “I just always loved the outdoors.”

She is a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, where she first explored and studied painting, earning a bachelor’s degree in 1966. Elliott also has a certificate in Computer Graphics from the Pratt Institute in Manhattan, a very practical addition to her resume, which has given her the ability to do freelance graphics, while affording her the time to pursue her travels and art.

It was after graduating from Sarah Lawrence that she threw herself into travel and outdoor adventure, often striking out on her own. Elliott’s trips included several visits to the Grand Canyon, an excursion following Lewis and Clark’s route across the United States, and a trip to Africa where she climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya.

While she traveled, her portfolio of painting was growing all along and her first shows were with the Graham Gallery in New York. Elliott has exhibited steadily for almost 30 years in various venues in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, and Georgia.

The centerpiece of the Silva Gallery exhibit is the magnificent hanging sculpture, “Yellow Mountain,” which evokes the grandeur of the site. You can see the passages she remembers, and even a waterfall, which Elliott recreated through strips of tumbling rice paper. The tonnage of the real Yellow Mountain is unimaginable, and the sculptor pays a certain homage to its weight. The work itself is as light as a feather, however.

Elliott’s “Yellow Mountain” is a site-specific installation created just for the Silva Gallery, a new concept for the artist. Previously, she had created pieces like this in her studio and then carefully measured to make certain they’d be hung correctly in the exhibit space. She would take the sculptures down from her studio and re-hang them for her shows, essentially creating the works twice. “Then I’d take them everything down, save it, put it in a box, put it someplace and pay for storage,” she says. It was the impracticality of storage that motivated Elliott to try a new approach. “This time, I started doing it in my studio and said ‘this is crazy.’ So I changed my attitude and I did this here (in the Silva Gallery), in one week,” Elliott says. “When it comes down, it comes down.”

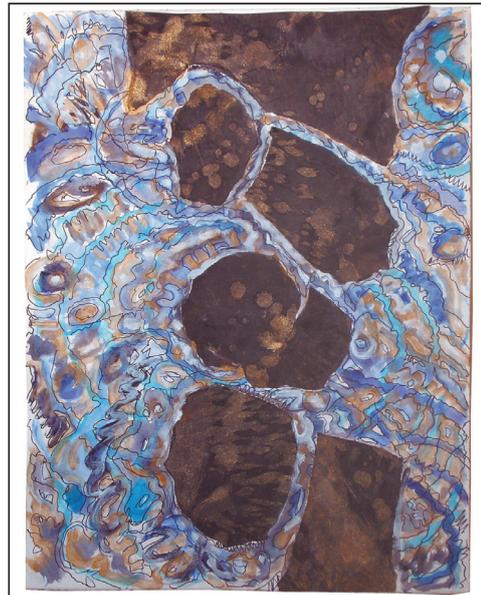
While it took Elliott seven or eight hours a day, climbing up and down a ladder, to craft “Yellow Mountain,” it will take only about five minutes to bring the sculpture down, she says.

The 20 other works in the exhibit are evocative sculptural landscapes that explore the possibilities of paper. Viewers have to be inspired by what must be Elliott’s labor-intensive process. Dun and stone-colored paper, flecked with gold paint, gives a feeling of the eternal, impervious quality of the rock formations, cliffs, caves, and mountains she viewed on her trip. And delightful details such as porticoes, stair steps, banisters, and even rope guides are recreated through Elliott’s painstaking cutting, shaping, and especially folding of the paper. Layering has become particularly important in her most recent work.

“I can’t work flat,” she says. “I love the volume. It’s intimate, up close and personal. I want people to respond to the rock. You can do this in all different ways. It’s fun. I really get into it, and I’ll try anything. It doesn’t matter where everything is. They’re not specific views of the sites, they’re just what I felt about the place.”

Elliott first discovered the Silva Gallery a few years ago when visiting a friend’s exhibit; she says she fell in love with the space. She walked into the then-new gallery and knew it would be a perfect place for her work, particularly for what she had created after her earlier trip to China. “I sent pictures of my work to the director of the gallery and said I would especially like to do an installation because (the space) had exactly what I needed,” Elliott says.

Elliott lives in an 18th century farmhouse in Lawrence with her



husband, Peter Gruen, a playwright and educator at the College of New Jersey. Incidentally, their son, Swann Gruen, graduated from the Pennington School in 2004. Now 23, he is an actor, residing in New York City. In 2008, Gruen and son collaborated on “My Last Tour,” a one-act play staged at a workshop at Passage Theater in Trenton. Elliott and Gruen’s daughter, Skye Elliott Gruen, 27, is an engineer like her grandfather, and has inherited her mother’s love for the outdoors.

Elliott jokes that her husband and son prefer less strenuous forms of amusement, like hanging in coffee shops near the trails mother and

daughter like to explore. “I’ve climbed a lot of mountains and I really like to be in high altitudes. In fact, I seem to do better at high altitudes,” she says. “Sometimes I even wonder if there’s too much oxygen down here for me.”

Art Exhibit, Silva Gallery of Art, Pennington School, 112 West Delaware Avenue, Pennington. On view through Thursday, February 5. “Immortal Mountains, Hallowed Caves,” the landscape evocations of Anne Elliott, www.anne-elliott.com, 609-737-8069 or www.pennington.org.

Gallery hours: Monday through Thursday, 1 to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

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