

Sandra Eliot: Art Is a Living Thing
Philadelphia Artist
Photographs by Giancarlo Luiso

“The creative process lies not in imitating, but in paralleling nature—
translating the impulse received from nature into the medium of expression,
thus vitalizing this medium. The picture should be alive, the statue should
be alive and every work of art should be alive. Every work of art is the
product of the artist’s power for conscious feeling, and of his sensitivity to
life-in-nature and life within the limits of his medium.”

—*Hans Hoffman, from “Search for the Real and Other Essays”*

MY intention is always to create a work that is alive so that every time someone encounters it there is something new gained; a new way of seeing is discovered. As Buddhists we can readily understand this idea of art as a living thing because we realize that life permeates the universe and everything in it.

From the beginning, my life has been a journey with a crayon or paint brush in my hand. My memories of school days center on my being the class artist. My childhood summers were spent absorbed in observing nature’s “aliveness.” This indirectly was the beginning of my lifelong connection to nature and my reflection of that spirit in the art medium. It was in high school summer art classes that I really started to express myself on canvas and paper.

LANDSCAPES were now “alive” both in my heart and on my canvas. In college there was no teacher who had an impact on me; it was a time to be absorbed in life-drawing, art history and learning how to teach art. My seven years of teaching high school art was a learning experience. I was a very demanding teacher, always expecting the students to do their best. My responsibility made me equally demanding of myself so I was always learning more art history, techniques and mediums and then teaching them. I know my students appreciated it because many times I have had experiences of a student walking up to me a few years later and saying something like, “You really taught me to draw.”

However, I was creating through my students’ excellent work and producing very little myself. After seven years, it was not enough for me. I left teaching and began to paint the landscape and people. Soon I began a period of travel, which opened new lands and sights to me, with my sketchbook as constant diary companion. While living in Paris for about three years, I had a solo show and participated in six or seven group shows, such as the “Salon d’Automne” and the “Salon de Mai.” There were also exhibits in Sydney, London, Zurich and New York where I showed and sold work. I also was able to study viscosity printing and etching plates with Sir Stanley William Hayler, founder of the internationally known Atelier 17. He taught art as a way to explore and learn about the world, saying: “Together with disciplines such as physics or mathematics, as with music or poetry, art is an attempt to extend and deepen our knowledge of life and our relations with our world. Furthermore, it is a way of seeking means of transmitting and sharing such experiences with others.”

In 1979, while living in Paris, I was fortunately introduced to Buddhism when I visited Anne Sanders in London. In sixteen years of practice, my life has been a very exciting learning experience. I am very grateful to be a part of our movement for peace

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and culture. My practice has helped me to focus on my work and to persevere no matter how many discouraging things happen.

PRESIDENT Ikeda's guidance has kept me encouraged and brought about a change in my attitude toward work when he said: "There are times when you must put forth tens of times the effort of those around you. If you lose the spirit of self-discipline, you will fall into a cycle of complaint, failing to produce anything of value." When I reach a deadlock, I reread his guidance: "When you encounter a wall you should tell yourselves, 'Since there is a wall here, a wide open expanse must lie on the other side.' "Rather than becoming discouraged, know that encountering a wall is proof of the progress you have made so far."

Advancing in my art's expressiveness is of prime importance. The abstract qualities in any art work are what make it strong and have emotional impact. The combination of elements such as line, color and contrast and the balance and harmony of these elements operating together are what makes it work whether it is a realistic or non-objective painting.

I am still working from nature when I create an abstract painting. It is more like poetry or music in that it invents something new and open, permitting the viewer to bring in his or her own experience. I may start with lines based on what I see now or on observations remembered or from my subconscious. After that, the lines on the paper take on their own life and I can react to that as if having a dialogue. The work progresses and changes—and may have many layers of paint or other materials that give it a richness or surface, color and image. This richness and depth parallel that which exists in nature. It is a great feeling of accomplishment for me when I create a work that expresses some unique dimension of nature, or I share my perceptions with other people as an artist, or as a teacher, and they gain some insight about the world.

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