Artist Elizabeth See takes advantage of ideal outdoor lighting in the Columbia Gorge.

A Change in Scenery

Artist and former potter finds continued success in creating images with paint

By Jeanie Senior

Four years ago, after spending more than two decades as a potter, Elizabeth See decided to change her medium and become a painter.

Which is why, on a recent chilly December day, she set up her easel on a point of land with a clear view to the west, down the Columbia Gorge. The clouds hung low and a cold wind blew, but the light was wonderful.

Huddled into a paint-stained sweater, Elizabeth made a quick oil sketch before the rain started again and she had to put away her oil paint.

Plein air, as outdoor landscape painting is called, is all about the light. Elizabeth's work is a combination of plein air and painting at home in her BZ Corner studio.

"It depends on the weather, sometimes it depends on how well it turns out when I first try to paint it," she says.

Elizabeth does not limit herself to landscapes. She enjoys painting birds, fruit, flowers and farm animals. A series of chicken paintings followed a visit to an exotic chicken show in Stevenson. Animal exhibits at the Klickitat County Fair produced a number of subjects. So have pastures around the county.

Sometimes people recognize their animals in her pictures.

"I've taken pictures of a farm and later had the owner of the farm come by

(a painting exhibit) and recognize 'My horse! My pig!' It feels strangely familiar to them," she explains.

The daughter of a college English teacher, with a mother who was a poet, an uncle who was a sculptor and a great-grandfather who also was a painter, Elizabeth says she has always loved art. She grew up in Leavenworth, took pottery classes as a child and studied drawing at Wenatchee Valley Community College. Then she moved to Barcelona, Spain, and studied pottery.

After studying in Spain, Elizabeth lived in Leavenworth for several years. She moved to the Gorge about 19 years ago, but she already had spent a lot of time there throughout the years, visiting family. Her painter great-grandfather, Charles King Benton, came to the Hood River Valley in the early 1900s and established an orchard that is still in the family.

Her father's parents, Ken and Katherine See, bought Tamarack Lodge on Mount Hood after World War II and operated it as a restaurant and cabins. Tamarack is no longer a business but it is family owned.

"I came back to the Gorge because it's

An exotic chicken show provided subjects for several of Elizabeth's oil paintings.

not as cold as Leavenworth, which gets these really horrible weathers," Elizabeth says. "Winter there starts two months earlier and ends two months later. I like it here because it's warmer down near the river. If you're looking for snow you can go up to the mountains."

After returning to Washington, Elizabeth began to hand-paint thousands of tiles with whimsical designs to sell at crafts fairs and for special orders. She also painted custom tiles for Ann Sacks, an up-market company in Portland.

"There was a time period where painted tiles were really hot, in the 1990s," she says. "That kind of petered out."

During the height of the market, however, Ann Sacks' customers would propose a theme and she would paint it. One woman wanted every kind of poisonous or dangerous sea creature for a bathtub surround. Elizabeth did the research and painted marine life, from sting rays to sharks.

A military base in California ordered 200 identical tiles featuring zebras.

"It's a wonder I can still see after that," Elizabeth says.

Four years ago, she took classes at Columbia Art Gallery in Hood River, and started oil painting.

"I thought, 'Whoa, this is so hard,'" she says. "But that's where I learned to paint, basically."

She jokes that if you want to learn to paint, just take some workshops.

"It saved $50,000 worth of art school," she says.

With a painting, she notes, you can easily recreate an image, something that with pottery is both difficult and expensive. She now sells prints and greeting cards as well as original oil paintings.

"Pottery is very limiting, dependent on glazes," she says. "It's so much easier to apply paint directly to a canvas. With pottery, first you have to create the pot or the tile."

After she started painting,

Elizabeth found she enjoyed making images more than she did creating the pot.

"Creating the pot was just a lot of work," she says.

When she made the move from pottery to painting, "I had to sell my kiln, wheel, everything—get it out of the house, so I couldn't make pottery anymore," she says. "That was a hard switch to make."

Now, she explains, her whole house is her studio.

"I have stuff drying or stuff being painted on all over," she says. "There's no part of my house that is just dedicated to living space."

She does most of her paintings on wood, and often paints on used cupboard doors that she buys at the Gorge Rebuild-it Center in Hood River.

"If you're a painter you can just sand those down, gesso and paint on them. That's a good way to go if you don't want to buy a frame, and use something recycled."

Elizabeth's paintings are at Columbia Art Gallery in Hood River, Artisans Jewelry in White Salmon and the Lane Gallery in Portland. She also displays her work at local fairs, including the Trout Lake Festival of the Arts.

As an artist, Elizabeth has needed other jobs. She has sold used books that she finds at estate sales, and she gets some income from a small rental property.

"It's made me some money and helped me make a living," she says of the various enterprises. "But it's not like I'm gloriously successful. I wouldn't recommend it as a career choice. I wouldn't recommend anything I do as a career choice. You combine them together and you can make a living. A lot of people who live in rural areas patch together income from a bunch of sources." ∎

Elizabeth posts images of her recent work, notes the shows and galleries where her work is exhibited, and includes contact information at her blog: http://elizabethseepaints.blogspot.com.