

Animal magic

Mike Smith meets
artist Lynne Wilkinson

A large group of people has gathered in front of a painting composed entirely of the faces of four cows, all portrayed in vivid close-up. The cows seem to be staring in an inquisitive way at the spectators, who are returning their stares and are about to show a keen interest in buying the painting. This was the scene that greeted Lynne Wilkinson when she returned to the display of her pictures at the 2008 Great Sheffield Art Show after visiting her father, who was seriously ill in hospital. Lynne told me: 'The painting was really done for him. Sadly, he died that very night, without knowing that the picture would be chosen from over 1,500 exhibits as Best in Show. He would have been thrilled by the news.'

Currently, cows are Lynne's favourite subject. Hens come a close second, but ducks, dogs, horses, lions, tigers, zebras, and even the occasional human, all feature in her artistic repertoire. Regardless of subject matter, her acrylic



Lynne Wilkinson at work on her painting 'Father and Son'

pictures are saturated with vivid colours and created with vigorous, uninhibited brush strokes. In many of the paintings, the animals stare out of the canvas so intently that the viewer cannot help but return their gaze and, in effect, become part of the composition.

Lynne's paintings are very popular, but she is able to meet the demand for her work by maintaining a prolific output from her studio space in the large conservatory of her beautiful home, which dates in part from the 14th century and is located in a cosy hollow at the foot of the village of Summerley, near Dronfield. However, she has not always been so productive. In fact, her career as an artist has been punctuated by a lengthy pause and it

could well have taken an entirely different direction.

Born, brought up and educated in Sheffield, Lynne was given the confidence to pursue her artistic talent into higher education by an inspirational teacher called Barry Williams. Rather than applying to study in another part of the country, she decided to try for a place at Sheffield Polytechnic's Faculty of Art and Design, so that she could continue to live at home and be close to the young man who would become her husband. However, two major obstacles stood in her way: she needed an extra O-level to qualify for a place and the faculty did not offer the BA course in fabric design that she really wanted.



Sunflowers



She solved the first problem by passing a GCSE examination in Geography after preparing for the paper purely by studying the subject in text books, without any input from teachers.

After graduating, Lynne took a teacher-training course and spent a number of years working in primary schools, initially on a full-time basis but changing to part-time when Amy,

she did almost no painting, preferring to devote any time outside her teaching hours to raising her children, carrying out home improvements and breeding dogs.

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The second problem could only be solved by a change of direction. As the fabric design course that she would have liked to take was not available, Lynne opted for a BA Honours degree in fine art and print-making. Although this selection was determined entirely by her wish to stay close to her boyfriend, it soon proved to be a choice that allowed her to make the most of her talent, even if her style of painting did not fit in with the usual requirements of the faculty. Sheffield’s students were encouraged to make lots of preliminary drawings in a sketch pad and to work up their paintings from a picture that had been outlined in pencil. Lynne never took to this method, much preferring to sketch out her paintings directly onto the canvas with a paint brush, a bold technique that she still uses. Pencils and sketchpads play no part in her work.

the first of her three children, was born. She also took on some teaching at the Mappin and Graves art galleries in Sheffield. During this stage of her life,

It was not until she was in her late thirties that Lynne made a tentative return to painting. Remembering her first renewed efforts, she said: ‘Picking up a brush again was like getting back on a bike after a long period of not using it. You’re very uncertain and wobbly when you start again. At first, I tried a few abstract paintings and some flower pictures, but I started to expand my subject matter when my confidence began to return. One day, my daughter ▶



ARTIST LYNNE WILKINSON



Jessica pointed out a cow and its calf in a field on a nearby farm. They became the subject of my next painting, which was shown at the Baslow Art Show, where it was an immediate success.'

Suitably bolstered by this positive response, Lynne embarked on further paintings of cows, always by attacking the canvas from a standing position with uninhibited brush strokes, often without knowing where her artistic journey would end, but almost invariably finishing up with a close-up image characterized by bright colours and great vitality. Encouraged by her husband, she also painted pictures of

the hens that roam the grounds of their home. A painting of four hens and a cockerel won Best Wildlife Painting at the Art in the Gardens Exhibition of 2007; a portrait of five cows won the Visitors' Choice Award at the 2010 South Yorkshire Open Exhibition and a picture of hunting dogs has been acquired by Leicester City Council for their permanent Sporting Art Collection.

Nor have Lynne's prize-winning paintings been confined to her trademark animal pictures. Her painting of the singer Dave Berry won the Celebrity Portrait Prize at the Art in the Gardens Show of 2007; a floral still life won the Open Exhibition Prize at the same show in 2008 and her interpretation of the well-known view of Monsal Dale from Monsal Head won the Tarmac Award at the Derbyshire Open Art Exhibition of 2010. Her work has featured in a show at Galerie der Stadt at Sindelfingen in Germany and in numerous group exhibitions organized by Peak District Artisans. Her paintings can be purchased from galleries in no fewer than four counties and can be spotted in cafés and restaurants throughout the Peak District, ranging from Hassop Station Café and Hobbs

Café at Monsal Head to the Dore Grill in Sheffield and Rowley's in Baslow. She has had a solo exhibition at the Turner Glass Museum and has been invited to submit work for a solo show in Buxton Art Gallery next year.

Perhaps driven by a desire to make up for those lost years, Lynne paints every single day, including weekends. Rather than concentrating on one picture at a time, she has as many as eight on the go. Each morning, she continues her 'romance with nature' by deciding which of the unfinished pictures to attack with her vigorous brush strokes. Some of her work is created in response to commissions, the latest of which has come from the *Bull's Head* at Monyash, which now has a very striking picture of a bull on its inn sign. People looking up at the sign as they leave the pub may well find themselves locked in a face-to-face confrontation with the animal, not as a result of illusions brought on by the effects of alcohol, but because the painting, like all Lynne's animal portraits, has an uncanny ability to engage the viewer.

To find out more about Lynne Wilkinson's paintings, see www.lynnewilkinson.co.uk or email lynnewilkinson777@yahoo.co.uk. Lynne is a member of Peak District Artisans.

