

FINDING FOCUS

After years of teaching others at her Austin art school, Elizabeth Locke now also devotes energy to her own work

By Virginia Campbell

Certain subjects can be difficult to paint. Some are overly complex; others involve challenging compositions; still others juxtapose unusual colors. And then there are those subjects that have become such clichés that it's hard to create an original and honest depiction. Cats—pet cats, that is—are a good example. In the same way that you'd better be God or a very brilliant painter to create a certain sort of melodramatic sunset, you're treading on dangerous ground when you set out to do a portrait of one of the coy, furry creatures that, on looks alone, rank as the divas of the animal world. Unless you capture a



feline at its snarliest or sneakiest, it can be just too pretty and cute to paint. But look at Elizabeth Locke's painting *Indica* sleeping. There is real essence of cat here, first of all, from the little paw pads to the tucked tail and squeezed-shut eyes. Moreover, this sleeping cat makes for a figure painting as involving to look at as many a reclining nude. The spontaneous sweep of the brush strokes juxtaposed against the snoozy stillness of the animal itself is lovely to behold. And the skillful color gradations that describe fur without detailing whiskers are just terrific. This is a cat painting that succeeds in part by avoiding the trap of too much sentimentality. Says Locke, who has taught at her own painting

school for two decades in Austin, TX, "My cat is my permanent inspiration. I've done so many paintings of her that my friends warned me I was going to become 'the cat painter.'" But this cat, the aforementioned *Indica*, is in no danger of reducing its owner to the level of cliché, and in fact figures into an important story Locke tells about herself. When she was under pressure a couple of years ago to produce enough paintings for a promised gallery show, she suddenly froze up. "I'd shut my school down for a month to devote time to painting," she recounts, "and the first day I set out to paint, I painted nothing. I didn't paint anything for 10 days. I was trying to force it, and I became worn down. I had this crash-and-burn experience. Then *Indica* happened to jump up and lie down on a cushion and go right to sleep, as if to say "paint me!". The painting just popped out, and I was fine after that."



The luscious, brisk brushwork that, along with assured coloration, characterizes Locke's paintings is a style that cannot be forced, because it requires confidence, readiness, and knowledge that is both embedded and accessible. When she paints, whether it's figures, still lifes, or landscapes—Locke is a versatile artist not in any actual danger of becoming “the cat painter”—she has to be “in the zone.” She has her own worked-out way of thinking about the problem. “I don't know if it's a matter of seeing more of the forms, or of the forms revealing more of themselves, but it's quite a surprise and a delight when it happens. Science has shown how the observer changes that which is being observed. Artists are observers, and when we observe with what I call ‘an open focus,’ meaning without preconceptions and judgments, the objects seem to reveal more of themselves to us. Often when you're working, you see the different parts of the whole at different times. You have to stretch your attention to hold the whole—that's open focus.”

Locke believes, “When you have open focus, it's as if the objects ‘feel’ seen, much like we do when someone really sees or gets us.” She continues, “And they ‘respond’ to that attention by blossoming, just like we do. Whatever it is, it's not about doing something to make it happen. It's a matter of not doing too much, but staying alert.” Locke can speak so articulately about the creative state in which she paints not just because she's thought a good deal about it, but because she was transformed by a dramatic experience of zone-dom back in 2000. The life-changing events were, she says, her “explosion into being a painter.”



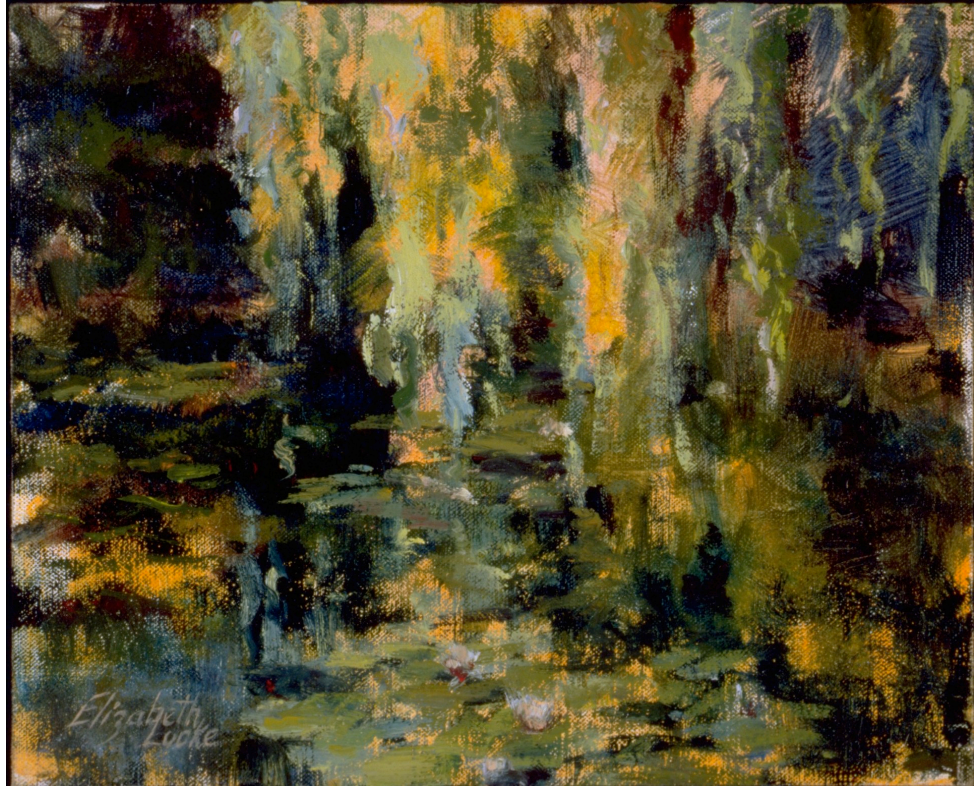
As she explains it:
“One of my students is a busy businessman who travels the world collecting art and is an aspiring painter himself. He has a reputation for turning people’s lives upside down in a good way and changing them forever. It was his idea for a group of my students to come with me to join a program called Art Study Giverny. About 19 of us went to France for the summer and painted the French countryside by day and Monet’s gardens in the late afternoon and evening. We were let back into the gardens after the public had left and allowed to paint until dark. All our meals were provided, so all we had to do was eat fabulous food and paint. It was a dream I hadn’t even known was possible. I had the chance to paint

again after a long time of not doing much of my own work. I found the painter inside me that I didn’t know was there. I was a student along with everyone else, and we were all so relaxed and happy during that time. I had the freedom and permission to paint the way I always wanted.

After that, I started showing and selling my work.”

Locke’s paintings of the gardens of Giverny show the quality of the explosion in their swift, vibrant brushwork, which approaches abstract expressionism, and their sure capture of the extreme light and dark color juxtapositions of late-day light. Many years of learning and teaching painting technique and color theory went into this revelation of her own gifts, which begs the question of how Locke managed to get to her 50s before she cut loose and became a professional painter, rather than a professional painting teacher who sold some of her work.

Locke was born into a family with artists on both her mother's and father's sides. Her mother's mother was an accomplished, upper-class painter of portrait miniatures on ivory in England. Locke's grandmother also did medical illustrations in support of her M.D. husband's research on skin grafts and reconstructive plastic surgery. Locke's mother emigrated to the United States and became a longtime fashion illustrator whose work often appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* after she left Locke's



father, who was one of the most successful illustrators' agents in New York. Locke's paternal grandfather was a successful professional artist who did landscape etchings of Vermont and Florida, and her paternal grandmother, a remarkable "primitive" painter in her 90s in the manner of Grandma Moses.

With artists of all types thus all around her, Locke drew precociously and studied at the Chouinard School of Art in Los Angeles, where her mother taught illustration, then at two schools in England that her mother had attended, and finally at the Art Students League in New York City.

Had she hit her 20s at a time other than the advent of the counterculture, she'd probably have dealt with her creativity, her doubts, and all the other things that one has to deal with to become a committed painter. Instead, she got deeply involved in meditation, becoming a teacher and traveling the globe for eight years assigning mantras and helping humanity chill. "I do things in an extreme way," she says, by way of explaining how completely sidetracked from art she got.

She married, had a son, moved to Austin, TX, and, when both her marriage and her involvement with meditation ended, she circled back to art by teaching painting at her own school, Austin Fine Art Classes. Over the years she learned from living painters like Quang Ho, Kim English, and Michael Lynch, and from reading and rereading people like Charles Hawthorne, whose *Hawthorne on Painting* is an inspiration even now. But she didn't put herself on the line with her own painting.

"I thought teaching was my calling," she explains, "and teaching has been a constant delight." Still, there was another kind of delight waiting for an opportunity to emerge, and that fateful trip to Giverny provided the occasion.

Decades of teaching and practice came together for Locke in a series of high-quality canvases that immediately caught the attention of galleries. Within a matter of weeks she was offered shows, which led in short order to the burn-out from which Indica the cat rescued her. "It's the ego that tries to own what is happening on the canvas when things are going well," says Locke, "and it's the ego that tortures you when things are not going well. The ego creates 'problems' where, a minute before, there were just painting situations being addressed. Dealing with my ego is like dealing with a cranky relative that you love and is part of your family. You just agree with it and it quiets down and you go back to seeing."



Locke, now 57, works the galleries that accommodate her desire to paint at her own pace, and she sells well. Her tonalist figures have particular appeal based on their fluid execution, contemporary affect, and, perhaps most of all, demonstrated love of paint and painting. "I paint to be astonished," says Locke. "I'm not sure who said this, but I love it: 'The aim of an artist is not to solve a problem irrefutably, but to make people love life in all its countless inexhaustible manifestations.' And in attempting to make people love life more, we get to love life more. Pretty good deal."

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, has also written for *Elle Décor*, *Departures*, and *Traditional Home*.

Locke is represented by Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Arts, San Antonio, TX; Waterhouse Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA; and Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX.