**Commissions, exhibitions, art school, workshops, art holiday tours, painting holidays**

**25.04.2018**

Started with a tour of the studio where XX works and runs her art school. She has 2 boys and takes the majority of domestic responsibilities. She owns the 100% of the company and it is now 21 years old.

CG: At the beginning what motivated you to start up the business in the first place?

XX: I think working full time for an ad agency as an art buyer. My job as an art buyer was to commission illustrations, drawings, designs, photography, art work from artist and photographers and ultimately I would have liked to be on the other side. I wanted to be the one being commissioned rather than doing the commissioning. I think I had two choices when I left school, my art teacher at school always said there are two choices; I could use my art as a hobby and just enjoy it or I could use it as a business but I would probably have to compromise from being pure fine art to use it more commercially so that I could generate an income to live off.

CG; Right, so therefore did you see this as an opportunity or was this something you were always going to try and do to make a living from? Did you always intend to set up the painting business somehow? What was the actual trigger point at which you decided to move from secure full time employment, to take this risk to see if you could make a business out of your art?

XX: Yes, a turning point? I had this opportunity to go and work in Kenya for about a year with the Masai, which was an amazing opportunity for me. I did it for about 1 year, taking sketch books with me wherever I went. I thought this is a point where I could make a change, from full time employment; it gave me the space to see how much I loved this type of art. I could have gone straight back into PR, but I thought; well I try and see if I can make it as an illustrator or a graphic designer and perhaps even as an artist first. Then if that didn’t happen I would go back to PR.

So I did take that opportunity, but I had 4 part time jobs at the same time. Working in a gallery, picture framing, waitressing…. anything! Then I shared a studio with 4 others, which I used for 1 day per week and did the other jobs the rest of the time. Increasingly I used the studio for more days a week and I gradually dropped the part time jobs, as my own work took off.

CG: So effectively you transitioned slowly into your business as your art business took off?

XX: Yes, but the part time jobs I did were art related, which was great. My main one which I kept on with it for a good 10 years was the working in a gallery and running the framing side of the business.

CG: And was all this before children? So you had the freedom to take those risks?

XX: I was about 20 when all this happened.

CG: And how did have children (two boys) impact on your business, would you say?

XX: It was slightly different back then as we were living in Zambia. I was lucky enough to have time to do my own thing, in a studio in the garden. So I did quite a lot of commissioned art work and quite a lot of children’s portraits. Fortunately for me at that time in Zambia there were very few artists and therefore hardly any competition for me. I was able to get a lot further, a lot more quickly than if I had been in a Western European country.

CG: Were the children’s portraits business, was that the type of painting you longed to do? Or was it the type of “product” that made commercial sense then?

XX: That was definitely bread and butter work. If anything it put my own art work, in terms of developed style back. Portraits have to be very detailed and much tighter whereas my work is looser and more impressionistic and so it probably didn’t help, but I quite enjoyed the challenge of capturing a likeness.

CG: So if you look back over you business, if we think about key milestones, which do you think were the most important turning points?

XX: Probably turns on when I had key exhibitions. There were a couple of very key exhibitions that did well, to me surprising well which I meant I could gear up on the success. To take a big step forward at that point; to put prices up, to be taken much more seriously as an artist. Various moments like that when it felt like a step change.

CG: And at those very points, were you getting support from anyone, was anyone mentoring you or giving advice to your at the big points of stepping up?

XX: No not really, not that I can think of.

CG: So really you were on your own?

XX: Well it was often based on advice from the gallery, the gallery owners because you work very closely with them. And then particularly if you are a fine artist, your closest relationship is with your framer and they can provide some excellent advice. The relationship between the gallery and artist is essential. If it’s awkward in any way, it will never work – a) they won’t promote you as an artist and b) you won’t want to put the commitment in that is required to create the right type of work they need by the deadlines of exhibitions. It has to work both ways and it is very much a built of a strong foundation of trust.

CG: Have you at any point relied / used / pulled in a network? The best way to describe it, is say for men who often have many peers as entrepreneurs, they can access them and discuss issues, draw new ideas, even advice from others who been through it. They have a kind of support system that helps at particular stages in their business.

XX: No nothing really like that. You can ask your friends who are other artists. Art is a very solitary business. You work on your own 99% of the time and so we do need to get out more. It’s great for inspiration to go to see other exhibitions, particularly the art fair exhibitions where you have lots of contemporary artists with new ideas and new ways of doing things. When they exhibit at the same time, you get to compare different framing styles, what is selling and what isn’t – that’s really important.

CG; When you looking at the array of products, when you catch up with art friends, do you ever look at their business and see how that might shape yours? Talking with those who mix their products like you, with an art school and various holiday products? Using new product ideas and spinning of from something that seems to have been successful for them?

XX: No, it’s so individual with art. It’s your own skill and interest and personality. So subjective to each person and it totally depends on what each individual circumstances are. I mean I have friends who aren’t married and don’t have children and they have certainly progressed a lot further artistically and more prestigious galleries more quickly because they were able to concentrate 24/7 on their art.

When it comes to mentor or people who can give advice, it’s really asking or talking to other artists you respect or who know your work. They could be 10 years older than you, been through it already or something like it or it’s going through things with the gallery owner. I do that a lot at the very end of an exhibition we go through what has worked, what hasn’t worked, what I should much more of, should I go in a particular direction, expand a type / piece. That’s why it is so important to have that relationship with the gallery owner. That feedback is so essential to know where to concentrate your energies. And the gallery owner needs the artist as much as the artist needs the gallery owner.

CG: That’s why it is interesting looking at different sectors because they all work so differently. Artist is so personal.

XX: Yes that’s right. When I watch friends who are also artists doing demonstrations, they use a particular brush stroke, but when I imitate it, the stroke has a completely different effect. Emulating someone’s style who you admire never works, it actually sets you backwards. You have to simple let your own style emerge and develop over time. And it will come, but you can’t rush it, which is why it is such an unusual business to be in. Complete one off, where your ideas come from.

CG: What proportion of your customer base is local? How localised is your business, so how centred is it here.

XX: For my teaching, yes it is centred here within a 50 minute drive radius, but the teaching is relatively new. When the recession started, I couldn’t rely on commissions or paintings and sculptures selling at exhibitions. Paintings and sculptures are a luxury item; they are the first tings to go. So it was working out what I could do to secure a new income source.

I had done 1 or 2 local workshop demonstrations for local art societies (A & O) and attendees had asked whether I offer my own classes. At the time I didn’t feel I had the skills or set up to be able to offer them. But then I considered it might actually be the only thing I could be considered qualified to do. So I contacted all those who expressed an interest and started off with a regular weekly class, 4 years ago now of seven people. Now I have 4 classes a week with 8 people attending each class. It has expanded. Regular classes are very much for the locals and they are short sessions. I do workshop days where people come from further afield and I do a whole day and provide lunch and I can take up to 12 people and I use the village hall for that (more space and flexibility). These are very popular as it allows people to come from greater distances. I find the day sessions much more enjoyable because you can cover and produce more and you don’t feel rushed.

In the last 3 years I have also started doing painting holidays. That was extraordinary as it was something I always wanted to do – somehow use my art to travel. I have a lovely artist friend, she has always been a bit of a mentor for me called H. She does painting holidays for a company called SS. It came about completely out of the blue, one of my pupils at my art school had been on holiday in Zambia with AS and had recommended Julia. The company were expanding, the lady who set up the company originally did all the trips, but demand has increased so much she needed to take on another artist to run watercolours and given my experience and art work I fitted the bill. Apart from one male artist, it’s all female team of 8. I’m about to do my third trip back to Zambia and I also pick up work with A Holidays which also came as a former pupil recommended me to them.

CG: So that’s interesting in that by offering the teaching service you have picked up a whole new arm of the business with holidays.

XX: Definitely and I am now also working for a couple of private villas and hotels running workshops and classes for them for a week or weekend here and there.

CG: With those new types of activities, do they give you for example 50%, 30% of your business income now? Are they bolstering your revenues?

XX: Oh definitely, and it actually it a nice position to be in, to have a regular income to be able to plan your finances. Whereas before you would be relying on an exhibitions and crossing your fingers and hope that you sell a picture. Now the teaching is great and combined with the holidays, probably represents 50% of my income now.

CG: So it’s really solidified the business in way, secured an income stream.

XX: Oh yes definitely, and I think the good thing with teaching and tutoring is that as an artist it gives you much more integrity. Galleries love it, because when they are selling your work they can tell customers your run your own workshops and that makes you look so much more substantial as an artist. They also love the idea that I go back to Zambia every year, as that means my works is so much more authentic as everything is drawn directly from live wildlife. It really does help.

CG: So would you say running your own business, as your children get older, has grown organically as you have more time and energy to commit to it?

XX: Yes definitely it has grown as I have gained more time, but I would also say it’s grown as I have developed and grown as an artist. It’s a bit of both.

CG: Now I’d like to turn to your local context. Have you ever impacted or had contact with anyone in local government in terms of support for your business or yourself as a business owner.

XX; None, never come into any contact or heard of it.

CG: In terms of being located here, do you feel that you are centred here. If you had to move your business tomorrow – what do you feel you would lose? In terms of your connections, customers, support network? Do you feel your business is moveable?

XX: I should say it is the other way around. The business feels like it is moving as I take on more holiday work. I’m not sure I have the balance right yet and I am probably doing too much teaching and not spending enough time on my own work. I would lose my local customers who come to the regular weekly classes. It would depend on how far we moved, it may well be worth my time coming back to the area to run a class. I know those people would still be here; often my clients love the idea of having a slot in the diary to get them out, others love the idea of a holiday.

CG: In your local area, I am wondering about those personal relationships that really support you. As a women we are relational, talking someone who doesn’t necessarily give you business advice, more they are giving you personal support to overcome a difficult patch in the business. Do you feel connected here in terms of support.

XX: Oh yes definitely.

CG: Therefore for you as an individual female entrepreneur, if you moved your business away would you struggle more, because you might lose the easy contact with that female, relational supportive network here.

XX: That sort of network which supports me within the business is actually a network of friends, that will always be at the end of a phone. That would always come with me. So I feel that my business is very transportable, but the loss of the teaching class would be a significant reduction in income to have to overcome. If I moved to another country…..yes that would certainly take time to build up a new business. But then when I was in Zambia before I did run some popular workshops, so it is possible it just takes time.

CG: How centred is your business, more so as a women? You have children and therefore your business is centred around their routines both spatially and temporally and therefore because of this is more entrenched to this area?

XX: Oh definitely way more entrenched than my husband. Say if we moved to Somerset, yes my business would definitely loose out for a couple of years, it would most certainly set me back. It certainly would take some years to build up a network where we moved to. Without a doubt, a good 2-3 years to gain a similar student base.

We do thing about moving sometimes and look at the options, but we need my income and moving would mean we would lose a significant part of it for a couple of years and that’s not doable now.

CG: Is there a way a local institution was active in the area, is there anything they could help you with ?

XX: I am quite self sufficient in the business, but then I think there is one thing they could help and that’s the social media marketing. Perhaps a day’s course and a web-site that provides up to date advice. I am not of that younger generation, I do have my instagram and web-site etc, but for someone to show me how to update my facebook etc and how to use it more efficiently and how to maximise my impact, the use of a blog etc. All that side of things that can be really important would be so helpful working on their own. I do find I spend 60% of my time working on the computer (emailing, admin, contacting clients and galleries). All those thing I never thought I would have to do as an artist, I just thought I would be painting in a studio. That boring side is crucial though – without them I wouldn’t be able to paint. Because I am having to learn as I go, I am just not that efficient.

CG: Is it specifically digital marketing, in terms of the social media?

XX: You reach that point as a self employed artist, you get to employ someone to do it all – update website, instagram, photograph the latest pictures and upload to the online galleries etc. But I am not there yet.

CG: What are your aspirations for the business now? Would you like to continue to grow and how, or would you like to simply go back to being an artist only again?

XX: Ultimately I would love to just be able to paint and not have to supplement this with teaching. But I do enjoy the teaching though, it is very satisfying seeing people progress, so I would miss it but it is a tie. As an artist you are always juggling, the necessary income you need to raise (tutoring, art trips etc) in order to paint. In many ways the tutoring hinders my progress as an artist. I don’t have the time to put into it.

CG; In effect your full ambition is to have enough money to paint? You ambition is not centred around raising more and more revenue etc.

XX: Yes to paint and sculpt and exhibit.

CG: Why are there so few female entrepreneurs? It could work so well around children if you can leverage your skills and find something you can enjoy.

XX: But it is a really difficult juggle. Consequently I feel you don’t either job as a mother or business owner as well as it needs. Balls are dropped all over the place and there are so many compromises. It can be very, very frustrating. My children do enjoy that I work, they like to be able to say what I do, but then they do resent if I can’t be around at half term etc.

I have yet to meet anyone who has solved this juggle. Well….I think if you have the resources for full time nanny / childcare and a housekeeper etc then maybe, but then do you really want someone doing it for you? I don’t another mother in the house, that’s me.

But yes, when I look at friends who haven’t had children and where they are now and where I am, I am definitely about 10 years behind them.

CG What would you say was the hardest thing about your business? On you own, driving it forward?

XX: I think the unpredictability of it, the time. A picture takes as long as it takes and sometime it doesn’t work. Time can run away.

CG: And yet you have to work around a predictable children’s routine.

XX: That’s absolutely right, I have a lot of half finished work that has been interrupted by a family /domestic need and then you lose the rhythm of it and it is very hard to pick that back up again.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29 30-39 40-49~~ 50-59 ~~60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time: ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4 5-1~~1 12-18

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4 5-11~~ 12-18

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: art degree

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Framing

Husband Occupation: Deputy Practice Leader

Husband highest educational qualification: degree

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (Both income not required.)

Two Additional Questions

**Please can you let me know how you judge your success? And has this changed since you first started?**

I do agree with the first two statements below, and the third that I have slightly adapted:

* Being able to be present for my children whilst also challenging my brain and developing my skills.
* Contributing to the family income
* Feeling like I am me again, as there’s nothing worse than being a frustrated artist!.

However, I’d also like to say that the avenue my work has now gone has changed/diversified now compared to before having children.

Being a freelance and self-employed artist it was always necessary to have an elastic approach to working and adapt if necessary.

Two things happened: the recession, and the need to step my career up a gear to verify my integrity as an artist, and start earning properly to contribute.

The recession meant that I couldn’t rely on selling pictures alone, I needed to do something to generate more of a “bread & butter” regular income – hence the teaching.

What I hadn’t anticipated was that the teaching underpinned my strength and ability as an artist in the gallery circuit…an added bonus!

To judge my success:

On the teaching side – by courses and workshop days are often fully or over-booked. Marketing has been mostly word of mouth or social media. The teaching has lead me onto do demos and workshop days for Art Groups and Art Societies, the Hurlingham Club, and tutor on painting holidays.

On the painting side – the teaching income has allowed me to be discerning about which exhibitions I do. Rather than be constantly producing work for every show going in the hope that it might sell, I can take my time to concentrate on my paintings, thus hopefully producing more quality work. After two solo shows at a London gallery and a third next year, I’ve also been able to increase my prices too.

As the children have got older, my working days are longer. However, I do struggle with getting the teaching/my own work balance right. As most people who are self-employed, its always too tempting to accept a commission or teaching job as one never knows when the next sale of a piece work will be!