

Amy Eliason

Painting What She Loves

[BY DONNA FISCHER]

It would be easy to assume that the secret to Amy Eliason's artistic brilliance is just a result of her considerable natural ability, but it's not that simple. When she puts paint to canvas, it's done with the skill that comes with more than twenty years of study, practice and perseverance. And yes, she does have a generous amount of natural talent, which her mother recognized early on. She supplied her daughter with pencils and sketchbook and taught her to observe the details of the natural world.

The natural world is where Eliason excels. Her paintings feature languid creeks and wetland critters basking in the hazy June sunshine, stunning Washington Island vistas and golden mornings after snowfall. She gives life to all of her subjects through her skill and appreciation. Quiz Eliason on the subjects she likes to paint, and you get a long list.

"There's a creative need inside me that just needs to get out. I love nature, and I love going for walks and watching the birds at my feeders and



then sketching them and painting them. I love flowers. I love my flower gardens and puttering around in my garden in the early morning. And I love animals and walks in the woods. [An] artist's best work is always something they love."

Eliason clearly doesn't approach her art halfway. Field study is an important first step in getting to know the elements that make up her subjects. To illustrate this, she hauls out a covered box and shows off the contents with a hint of glee in her voice.

"I've got birch bark, pine cones, sea shells, you name it. This box is a treasure to me."

Photos are useful to be sure, but Eliason explains that these small reference pieces can infuse a higher degree of realism into her work.

But it doesn't stop there. Eliason is just as skilled at capturing human likenesses. One painting in her tidy workshop catches my eye in particular: that of a woman and girl sitting on a dock and splashing their bare feet in the water. This painting should be attached to speakers because it evokes a sense of joy that is almost audible. The girl's face reveals a delight only the young can know.

"I strive to do upbeat, uplifting artwork," says Eliason. "I want to create a happy

memory for somebody or put a smile on their face."

Here I also learned that Eliason (and probably many other artists) prefer oil paints for certain techniques and acrylic paints for others.

"When I use oil paints, it's wet-on-wet. It's better for flesh tones and real subtle blending. And when I use acrylic paint, you're painting wet-on-dry. It dries very quickly. So it's great for nature ... layering textures: fur, feathers, leaves."

When Eliason is not working at her regular job, she can sometimes be found showing would-be artists the ropes of painting. I asked about the challenge of teaching art to people of varied skill levels. She seems completely unfazed by it.

"I simplify it. First job I have is to put my students at ease, so I tell them 'if you can draw an oval and a circle and a rectangle and a triangle, then you can draw anything in the world. Anything you draw is made up of simple shapes. Anybody can draw if they want to. If they practice, they'll get better. So teaching all different skill sets is introducing new ways to look at things and establishing confidence in the artist so that they can just do art and not worry if they're good enough or which way to

hold this pencil or whatever."

One easy way to watch Eliason put brush to canvas is to attend Arti Gras at Shopko Hall on March 4th or 5th. She says it's a good opportunity for her to reach out to potential customers and also share what she's learned with fellow art lovers.

"There are two groups of audience: there are people that are artists or closet-artists, and they have a lot of questions. It's an opportunity to answer their questions and then they can watch me paint. And then there are people that are intrigued, and they want to watch me paint.

They are not artists, but they might have questions on, 'could you paint my kids, or my dog, or my horse, or my cottage.' I do some special order paintings for people. It's a good place to touch base with them."

Eliason recently completed ten paintings that were purchased by Nicolet National Bank in Green Bay. On display in their downtown location, the paintings show a slice of Wisconsin life. One series called "Jake's Story" features a weathered looking gentleman repairing fishing nets on Washington Island. It's encouraging to see a business step up and support a local artist.

When asked about other possibilities for her work in the Green Bay area, one obvious subject comes up: the Packers. Eliason, who happens to work part-time as a security guard at Lambeau home games, is not shy about her zeal for the Green and Gold. In her studio, there is a Packer-themed painting in the early stages of completion. In it, a small crowd of ladies seems to be chanting, "Go Pack, Go!" She shows me the photo that she's using as a reference and it's clear this one

is going to be a lively work of art.

"I love painting enthusiastic Packers fans, at their best, full of joy and energy, their faces all happy. I would love the opportunity to do some of these paintings for the area around Lambeau. I've painted many murals, I would be so happy to get involved in that."

Eliason has worked full-time as an artist in the past, but now prefers the security of a job close to home. As with most things, it comes down to balance.

"There are a lot of people that would like to do it more for income but they're not sure how to get there. How do you leave a steady paycheck and do art full-time? In Green Bay that's a huge hurdle, but there's no reason why you can't balance both. I've done it for twenty years now; I've balanced art and a full-time job and raising kids. Green Bay has many opportunities to nurture artists and creative thinkers will continuously come up with new ideas."

For Eliason, art is a way for her to share her positive energy with others. She managed to overcome breast cancer and is six years cancer free.

"I do not take any day for granted; every day is a precious gift. God created all this beauty around us. We can look at the gloom and doom or we can look at the beauty, and it's up to us to stay positive and faith-filled and to always look for the good in people and see the beauty in things."

To see more of Amy Eliason's paintings or to learn how you can take lessons, go to AmyEliason.com, or call (920) 621-3389. ■

Donna Fischer is an avid fan of music, film and art. When she's not writing on these subjects you'll find her gardening or snowshoeing around Green Bay.