

Penny Billington

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Dear Courtney,

lots of life and work have intervened since we spoke, making this email a bit tardy, for which apologies.

Good to talk the other day: here are some questions which might make up into a very informative interview for our members..... There are quite a few, so do feel free to ignore any that don't appeal and splurge on others – just as if we were talking. And many, many thanks for your time!

I look forward to hearing from you at your convenience: regards, Penny

STARTS NOW

Courtney Davis interview for Touchstone magazine.

Courtney, you're respected internationally as an artist. What were your first steps on this path?

Within 4 weeks of a major spine operation and a series of psychic experiences while in hospital, I was celebrating in Summer Solstice on Glastonbury Tor. I hadn't planned to, but could not get down the Tor again on my crutches after the struggle of getting up there, so stayed up there all night.

You've specialised in the Celtic style – what is its particular attraction for you?

It didn't really attract me for a while, I had been creating William Blake style images and needed a border. My wife at the time made nice comments on the borders and wasn't interested in the main picture. Gradually the Celtic art took over, though it was still full of heavy symbolism.

As druids, we believe in the flowing of inspiration, and try to put ourselves in the way of it. How do you access inspiration?

I was asked to create a portrait of Merlin and the only clue I was given for the commission was to go out at night and ask for Merlin's help while looking at the Plough. A shooting star soared through the Plough. When I returned to the house and went to my desk, I started to see lights touching the drawing board. Over the next 7 years I was taught to let them take over my pen and brush and trust in the energy.

Does the creative process have a spiritual component for you?

Before I began creating the art, I had gone through a period of searching to find my path, I did a lot of spiritual healing but as I have discovered many times, the door that opens is often behind you and you have been pushed through before you realise it. The art only started because I was looking after my mother after my fathers death.

You work a lot on commissions. Do you ever have 'artist's block'? And if so, what are your techniques to kick start the creative process?

I have created just under 50 books and never have artists block, in fact I feel the images queuing up inside me ready to come through. I often create a picture a day and never take longer than 3 days to finish larger pieces. When the energy is at full blast it becomes a hard task master, thankfully there is always laughter and the odd poke in the back to keep things light!

How do you approach each new work?

I start with a feeling in my heart space, often I will sit in a chair and cat nap with the image on my mind. When I awake I begin very very rough pencil scribbles to the shape within. Gradually this then starts to get more detailed. The intricacy only comes in the final piece as I don't work from a fully finished rough as changes often still happen even at the final stage of a piece of work. Many pictures have actually been painted over with another idea , though the background image still shows through giving it a multi dimensional feel.

You are famous for meticulous repetitive borders and the intricacies of your Book of Kell's-style carpet pages. Can you describe the effect drawing in this way has on you, and would you say it has therapeutic value?

A lot of time in the past I used to get very impatient with border work as I was always keen to start on other areas that might seem more interesting. This was possibly because of the tight deadlines on the pictures, St. Patrick, A Visual Celebration is a fully illuminated book on the words of the saint. I had to create a fully illuminated page from scratch each day.

Does working in this style connect you in any way to the ancient monks who first did this work?

I am lucky to have relics of St. Columba, St. Bridget and St. Patrick from the Vatican beside my drawing table and often feel a presence of that time around me.

In contrast to the meticulous geometry of your borders, your painting style is characterised often by flowing, melting tones and shades. How do you feel this complements the mythological subject matter?

I guess, because I live in the two worlds it reflects in the art I create, I never think of what colours use, I work to fast to have time to choose. Often I wonder where the picture is going, sometimes I start from the bottom and work up or from the centre and work out. The lights direct the way, hands on my shoulders encourage me and when I stop to rest, they take my hands and we look at the piece together.

Whenever I am asked in interviews or talks about Celtic myths and legends, I have to explain that once I have completed the picture the memory of the background to the piece is erased from my mind, this way it keeps the link clear and I don't interfere with the flow of the image. I know an embarrassingly small amount about the Celts and Celtic history.

How many processes might be involved in a complex work?

Once I get the rough outline I like to get started on the original as quickly as possible and often work small areas until they are finished and then move on. The picture is already formed, I am part of the process of its birth into this world.

Some of your pictures incorporate ancient artefacts – do you have specific sources and resources to draw on?

I have collected many books on Celtic, Anglo Saxon and Viking art over the years. Before I began adding the Celtic art to my pictures I was living on the corner of the British Museum in London, I often visited the Egyptian section but never looked at the Gospel books. It wasn't until some years later when I was asked to exhibit there while the Matter of Britain exhibition was on that I took my first glimpse of the early books. I think that I would not have had the presumption to have even considered starting a career in Celtic art if I had seen the stunning work created all those centuries before.

How important is historical veracity in your work?

None, I feel that the artists would have wanted us to keep the tradition going but on a path where the art grows with inventiveness and a passion to touch the light.

Genius (or creativity!) 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration. Any comments on this?

In 30 years there has been a lot of sweat and a great deal of tears, never made a fortune from it. I have always felt separate from Courtney and often tell people I hang him up like a coat when I am finished. The state I am in when the pictures are happening is one

of non state, so not sure where the genius bit comes in. Since starting to move out of the studio and giving talks, healing workshops etc. there are changes occurring a shifting of consciousness. I am in the creative state much of the time and now its directing me through speech rather than brush and pen. Its extremely exciting.

Have you any advice for the druid novice artist who wants to express themselves through myth and legend?

Get a dog, take it out for a walk on evening and look at the Plough..... you never know!!

Courtney Davis, thank you very much.

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If you want me to say more on some sections please let me know.

One of my earliest book covers was for Philip Carr Gom and The New Celtic Review (forgotten his name but a real character)