



Elaine interviewing Olivia, Illustrator

Olivia: Having been here a few months, I was really already missing the lack of a workplace, because my studio was really part of my life and so, I was very, very happy when the Conseil municipal at Bulat-Pestivien, it's just the commune next door to where we live, they agreed that I could use an empty room, which is an old classroom, as a studio, and it's perfect, because this room has not been done up at all. It's got a bit of dry-rot and other things. The main thing is that it's got massive, big windows, and much though I love where we live, and I love the vernacular architecture, I don't think anyone can say that the typical Breton buildings have too much light in them, because they're lots of big stone walls, and certainly where we live, the lack of light is a bit of a problem. So, for a studio, this is perfect. I've got big windows, and I've moved over enough of my stuff to be able to function just about and get the book finished.

But, I didn't realise when I signed the contract with the mairie, I was so excited to have a studio space at last, that when the now ex-maire had explained to me, she said she was worried, because she thought it was maybe too much work to do, the mural, and I said, "What mural?" She said, "Well the mural that you're going to do in exchange for your residency." I said, "Oh, OK, well, anyway, it's a great project, and I'm very happy to do it, so the school at Bulat has got a wall about 21 meters long, 2 ½ meters high, and until now, well, it's still fairly blank. It's going to be re-painted, and, basically, we're going to depict the procession, life size. We're going to depict some of the old trades, les anciens métiers du Bulat, I mean, it's quite a small commune, but at the same time, up until 20-30 years ago, there was about 50 or so different trades, just here in the village, and obviously most of them have now disappeared. I've asked the children to research a little bit if there's anyone in their family who was doing a particular job that they want to represent, so we'll have a representation of the different trades that were here, and obviously a couple of work horses as well, because they're very important, so the chevaux de travail and we're going to have a mural of life-size people – sort of traditional, but with a contemporary touch, as well, I don't want to do it just like a sort of old pardon.

Elaine: Will they have a chance to get their hands on a paintbrush or two? The children?

Olivia: Yeah, I'm not doing the painting. I'm going to sit and supervise in a deck chair. Just don't tell the maire. No, I think what we're going to try and do is make up the image as a line drawing, so it's up to me to compose that all together. But the children have already done some brilliant drawings. And, in fact, they've done some great research. So, they came up with some trades I'd never even heard of.



The most popular one, which we had several versions of, was a word that I now can't remember, and I'd never heard before, but it's actually was the leech merchants who went around selling leeches or renting out leeches for doing cures, obviously.

Elaine: That's right. They used to stick them on you, didn't they? They would suck the blood.

Olivia: Which I knew happened, but I hadn't, I mean what I really like is when I am learning words that I didn't know, some of them, maybe I don't want to know. But, no, that was really great that they had taken the initiative, and they had gone out and researched things and asked their families, and hopefully, as many people as possible will be coming to help do the painting. So Alain Goutal, who's an amazing artist, who lives not far from us, I've already recruited him. He'd suggested actually projecting onto the wall the image and tracing it out on the wall, which would make it much easier to allow people to then come and do a bit of – not exactly colour-by-numbers – it'll be better than that ...

Elaine: Well, then they can say, "That was the piece that I did, and that was a piece I did, that piece there," and they'll be so proud of that. I also understand apart from this mural, that you've now been obliged to create, as it were, that you're working on a book about Medusa.

Olivia: I am. Yes. This book is by Jessie Burton. She's an amazing writer. I had read some of her books obviously already, and the *Miniaturist*, like with many other people, is my favorite, and this is her second book for young people. And, yes, it's retelling the story of Medusa, who we all know as the Gorgon who was decapitated by Perseus. She's always represented in this rather horrific way, very ugly, and she really doesn't come out very well at all. Whereas in Jessie Burton's retelling, it's making her into a real young woman, who's the age of about 18, who's gone through a very traumatic experience of rape and then been cursed by a female goddess. And, in this book, she's on an island in self-exile, or self-isolation, which seems fairly appropriate nowadays, with her two sisters.

Elaine: She's self-distancing.

Olivia: She is. And luckily, she's got her two sisters with her, and one day Perseus arrives on his boat, and she and him have a long conversation, which is what most of the book is, but without ever seeing each other, because she knows that she can't look at somebody. She doesn't know why, but that was part of the package that Athena has given her, that she can't look at any man. She doesn't know that it will basically transform him into stone, but they have a conversation. She can see him, because she's peeking over the rocks at him, but he's never seen her, until right at the end.



It's quite unusual to have an illustrated book for -- because I just do the drawings, obviously -- but to have an illustrated book for older children or adolescents, it is quite unusual.

Elaine: Well, I mean, I look forward to finding out more about that. Thank you so much for your time today.

Olivia: Well, fantastic. Thank you.