

Elaine interviews Olivia Lomenech Gill, illustrator with an exhibition at la Roche Jagu

Elaine: So, Olivia, it's good to catch up with you again. Now, to kick-off, you've been described as an artist and an illustrator, but what do you get most satisfaction from?

Olivia: I would still describe myself as an artist who sometimes works on books. And in fact, I'm not trained in either, fine art or illustration, so I suppose my approach is always – it depends, if I'm starting an art work, I realise, retrospectively, that I'm always starting with a subject, or an idea, and sometimes a story in mind. Obviously, illustration is the process of interpreting somebody else's idea, somebody else's narrative. But I think I approach both artworks, artworks that I make of my own and illustrations that I do for other people, in a fairly similar way.

Elaine: Some illustrators have a very definitive style, like Quentin Blake, who does world-class books, and I think he also now does David Walliams's children's books, but yours is very wide-ranging, from the let's say the simple and obvious poster of, for Michael Morpurgo of *War Horse* to the more amazing and imaginative *Fantastic Beasts*, so what inspires you most and where do your ideas come from?

Olivia: Well, I think my, the look of my work, if there is a look, and the style in which I work is, and the fact that I don't have an illustration style, maybe, is based on the fact that I'm not trained in illustration and, in fact, all of my work is made using varying techniques, often in combination, so I use a lot of print-making, etching, which has a certain look in itself. I'm using collage, I'm using oil-painting, so I would say that what most inspires me is – are real subjects, not the fantastic at all, in fact I was quite surprised when I got chosen to illustrate *Fantastic Beasts*, because I don't exist at all in this realm of fantasy. What inspires me and what I did for that book was look as much as possible to the real world to the inspiration of amazing, truly fantastic things we find in nature, that we're in the process of destroying, but real species, and also finding what is fantastic in the immediate surroundings, in the ordinary. But, the *War Horse* art work I did for Michal Morpurgo, that was created using the same techniques as I've used in *Fantastic Beasts*, so I don't know, it's difficult for me to say ...

Elaine: The two have run together, in a way.

Olivia: I think, I will approach everything I do in the same way, so I would not have chosen to approach *Fantastic Beasts* in a different way to anything else, but I was aware that *Fantastic Beasts*, you've got to really have a wide range of techniques and styles to make -- because there's illustration everywhere, on every page, for it not to become repetitive and monotonous. But, I think if I look different to other illustrators, it's because

I'm using probably quite a wide of techniques and materials and media, and because I don't have a training in any specific, secific medium.

Elaine: And you've got the talent and the skills. Now, most importantly, what we're really here to talk about is what can we expect to find at the forthcoming exhibition at La Roche-Jagu?

Olivia: Well, this is amazing, I was contacted two years ago by Nolwenn Herry, who is the director of exhibitions, and she was asking if I would expose, sorry, if I would exhibit with them, because, what is really amazing is that they're doing an exhibition every year, in the autumn, dedicated to illustrated books or illustration, which is something I've never seen anywhere else, and so, of course, I was delighted to be asked to do this. This exhibition will be including four books I've worked on, two books for Michael Morpurgo, and one book for Jessie Burton, the *Medusa*, that I was working on the last time we met, and that came out a few months ago, so that's very exciting, and also, we're including a few of the *FantasticBeasts*, which were exhibited at the Natural History Museum in London, some of which have gone to Toronto, but hopefully a few of them are coming to Brittany. There's about 70 artworks altogether. There'll be also display cases with different – I don't know what you call it – paraphernalia –

Elaine: Curiosities?

Olivia: Curiosities and sketchbooks, and few things to help show how the work is made, so yeah there's about 60-70 artworks all together – a range of drawings, paintings, etchings, and also there's a couple of sculptures that will be displayed as well.

Elaine: So it's a very eclectic range of artwork.

Olivia: Fairly eclectic, yes. And, obviously four different books, so you're getting four different, maybe four different looks, I don't know if they all look the same or not, but it's really nice as well for the publishers to have this opportunity of promoting their books, and I hope there might come along, but ...

Elaine: This could really lead to something a little bit, you know, productive, profitable?

Olivia: I don't know, I mean the object of the exhibition and the Roche-Jagu's such an amazing venue -- I went to see it first time around a few months ago, and I was just, I just went around the exhibition they had of the "Anima Ex Musica," which was an amazing in itself, but I was torn between the artworks in the exhibition, which were recycled old instruments, musical instruments, that have been created into sculptures of insects, and

as well as loans from museums and collections, and then also the building itself, it was just a big, overwhelming experience.

Elaine: A stunning experience.

Olivia: It is. It was great.

Elaine: I believe, also, that you plan to do a couple of workshops, is that right?

Olivia: I know we've definitely got a workshop on the 6th of November. So, I'll be trying to, I can't actually take a printing-press up there. Even the small printing-press I've now got installed in my studio in Saint-Nicodème ... even the small one is too heavy, I've just put wheel on it, but it's not gonna roll all the way up to the Roche-Jagu. But, we'll be able to explore some other techniques, probably drawing, painting, and talk about how the work's made.

Elaine: Will that be open to every age group, any age group, or children?

Olivia: Yeah, I'm happy to have anyone come along ... I don't know if La Roche-Jagu has any age restrictions or not. No, I think it is the same way as I do with the books. I've never sat down to make illustrations that are for a certain age group. My first illustration commission was for Michael Morporgu's *Where My Wellies Take Me*.

Elaine: That's brilliant, I love that.

Olivia: The first book I ever did.

Elaine: It resonates with every child, I think, who's got Wellies, haven't they.

Olivia: Yes, well, what I suppose I wanted to do was to make it not just for children, and it became, amazingly it became something that older people have enjoyed too – or grandparents have enjoyed with their children and grandchildren and it's been bought for babies, it's been bought for older people, so yeah, I don't have any, oh, what do you call it – I don't have an approach that is ...

Elaine: Ageist, particularly ...

Olivia: No, and I don't work in a style that I think is particularly for children either. I'm working on a book about crows at the moment, which is, I think, for quite young children. There's very little text in it, but I'm still doing oil paintings, and I'm still doing all of the things that I would normally do, because for me, it depends ...

Elaine: That's interesting, because crows aren't the most attractive of bird species, are they? They're interesting, perhaps, but they're always likely the "bad boys" of the bird world.

Olivia: Yeah, Well, they're not very well viewed certainly not by farmers and people trying to grow crops. We don't really have many crows here at Saint-Nicodème; we've got sort of jack-daws, but there's not many crows, so I've been trying to find examples to study.

Elaine: So, finally, have you ever thought of writing your own and illustrating your own book?

Olivia: A lot of people ask that question, and it's not something that I'm ready to do right now. I just think there are so many books out there. There's so many ... I think everybody thinks they should write a book. Yeah, I'm not confident enough that, it would have to be good enough to justify the trees that are cut down to make the paper, and I'm not there yet.

Elaine: Maybe one day there'll be that the light-bulb moment will go on and you'll say "Yes! Here it is. I've got the words in my head" or maybe it will start the other way with drawing some pictures and then thinking of the story to go with it.

Olivia: I don't know, because already I doubt whether my drawings are good enough half the time and to then tackle the words as well ... I think words is, it's an art-form in itself and it would be a little arrogant of me to think that I could start writing as well as illustrating, but I love, in fact, what I really like is responding to other people's writing, and particularly poetry, where there's not all the words there, if you see what I mean, so it's suggestive and it ...

Elaine: Poetry is the highest form of human thought.

Olivia: Yeah, and it's something I, I've worked on a couple of anthologies of poetry, and it's something I would like to do more, but I've got a big respect for people who can use words well, and I don't count myself as one of them.

Elaine: Well, best of luck with the exhibition and I look forward to coming up to see it, because I actually haven't been to La Roche-Jagu and I've heard a lot about it. I keep planning to, but something ... anyway, so best of luck and I know you're very pressed for time, so I'll let you get on.

Olivia: Well, thank you very much.