

Interview with Chris Hankey and Julia Robinson Artists Penzance



Life style businesses come in many shapes and sizes, some evolve over time whilst others are born with you. Chris and Julia did not choose their vocational business, I think it chose them. They are both artists based at their countryside Cornish home, north of Penzance.

I asked them where they both got their inspiration from and Chris replied, "When I was very young the only thing that used to keep me quiet was Mum giving me a pencil and a sketch pad. It kept me out of trouble, and it just developed from there really."

Julia answered, "My Polish parents had a house in Bristol which was full of folk art and its vibrant colours. I think you can still see that in my work today".

The couple met when they were doing their college degree in Wolverhampton in 1984. They painted together, went on to do some artist residencies in Epping, Kent and Cardiff and teaching foundation in art together at Western Super Mare.

Julia is heavily influenced by abstract expressionist painting and has come to focus entirely on colour in her work. While Chris's abstract landscapes are rooted in his love of the outdoors, he told me about one particular trip to Poland which inspired them.

"We went up into the mountains whilst everything was still frozen. It was a precarious walk up to a mountain hut, where we arrived late and thawed out. By the time we had warmed up it was twilight. We stood by a big frozen lake, which was covered in snow, like the mountains in the distance. It was slightly foggy and, as dusk fell, you could see the silhouette of the mountains. The light was just bouncing off the snow and off this mist. The world dissolved entirely into blue - it was just one of those turning points I think. A pivotal moment for us both as artists."

Travel has always featured prominently in their lives; they have both visited places such as the central desert in Australia and have now settled in Cornwall with their children Aaron Saffron and Lili.



I asked them about their business being based at home, with lively children. This can often be a problem for people with a lifestyle business as the mix of family and work can cause tension. Chris and Julia seem relaxed about this, as they seem to be relaxed about everything else. They each take turns to have quiet times in the studio and when the children do invade they have a great roll of paper and poster paints for them to enjoy. Having the new studio seems to have helped as they don't have to worry about the mess, they can

just leave it behind them.

Another difficulty that lifestyle businesses encounter is the problem of living and working together. Chris and Julia seem very supportive of each other and allow each other space when they need it. Their business/life balance seems to work very well.

I have often met people who are passionate about their work and one of the greatest challenges is being objective about something so close to your heart. Artists often encounter this difficulty. I asked Chris about his marketing. He replied, "When we first started, we went up to London and walked around loads of galleries with portfolios under our arms. You can't really do that anymore, because they now ask for photographs and CD's and are inundated by artists wanting to sell. The hardest part is getting your first gallery and getting you first sales. After that you have a bit more credibility."

He admitted to having a tough time dealing with the commercial part of his work, "It's hard as it's all about looking at my work as though it is some sort of product. If it sells at the end of the day then great, I can make a living. But painting is something I have to do for my own sanity."

He seems to be doing well, though, with three exhibitions at Tresco, Porthminster and Bristol; he has put together a website and he is talking to Simon Nash about a BBC programme. He has also been asked for commissioned work through the galleries.

We moved on; I thought it might be interesting to ask Chris and Julia what advice they may give for someone who wished to make a living out of their own art. Chris replied "you can't rest on what you have achieved. You have to keep pushing all the time, just because you have got one gallery showing your work doesn't mean you should stop pushing for more new venues. Don't rest on your laurels."

Julia added "you must not be put off by every 'no'. You will get a lot of them, especially if you are using the cold approach and sending CD images to galleries. It's very easy for someone to turn around and say 'I don't like it', but you have to move on. Remember that you have to forget about the people who are not interested, because there will be people out there who are."

Chris also said that "if it is not working, you must consider changing the nature of what you do."

They both thought a great deal about this question and went on to suggest that budding artists should understand exactly what the terms of their contract with the gallery are. If they get a commission then they must understand what it is the person they are dealing with wants from them.

I asked them what the future held for their work. Julia is developing her colour filled abstract painting whilst Chris is still doing landscapes based on the countryside around him. It was wonderful to meet two such committed people and see their fascinating work. They have a connection with the landscape in which they live, manage to explore their passion through their art *and* balance all this with a lively family. This adaptability is the one of the wonderful things about a lifestyle business. It's a bit like a journey and everyone is welcome. It looks very much as though Chris and Julia, their children and their lifestyle business still have a long way to go. Good luck to them.

