

**Elizabeth Snelling , *Easton Irregular Art Profile*, September 2012 Issue**

You probably have seen Elizabeth Snelling's portrait paintings in exhibitions around the Lehigh Valley. She has an immediately recognizable style. Snelling has a peculiar way of engaging her sitters with the viewer, yet they don't look like they are posing. While visiting her studio in Easton's College Hill, I felt I met her sons, friends, pets, family and acquaintances. An Expressionist, she paints loosely, uses color freely and is selective about where she employs her hyper descriptive powers. She sensitively records human features and also gives human-like expression to objects and animals. Her portraits of domestic interiors are expressive as well, revealing her taste and personality in the form of a room as she adroitly captures the texture of a Persian rug and the crooked gleam of plumbing and chandeliers. The late Alice Neel came to mind, and Elizabeth told me she had been lucky to meet Neel: "The show was at the NYU student gallery, I was working with Leslie Brown, daughter of Judith Brown, installing a group show of New York artists, and in comes Alice Neel with her self portrait in the blue-striped chair...it was very impressive and brave to me."

After receiving a B.A. in English Literature from Mount Holyoke College in 1979, Elizabeth studied etching at Pratt Manhattan, painting at The Art Students League, and weaving with Peggy Osterkamp. In the early '90s she continued to study weaving with The Friends of Finnish Handicrafts and printing at The Philadelphia College of Science and Textiles. She has shown widely: the Ahlum Gallery, J. Lima Gallery, Connexions, and Laini's Little Shop in Easton; Ambre Studio and eDavid Gallery in Bethlehem; LITM Gallery in Newark and Riverbank Arts in Stockton, NJ. In 2011 she showed with the Allentown Chen Arts Group at the Salemme Foundation in *Walking on the Edge*. In Mercantile Home in Easton she currently has paintings and work available from the flat files.

Elizabeth and her family travel every year to Vietnam. Hanging in her kitchen is a portrait of a Vietnamese water buffalo, or *con trau*. She modeled the painting on a particular stuffed buffalo in the Museum of Ho Chi Minh—reputedly, it accompanied him on what became known as The Ho Chi Minh Trail. Rich raw and burnt umbers and yellow and red earth tones dominate the painting. Cool tones are limited to the animal's small, blue-grey eyes, along with subtle grey highlights that render the nose, horns, and hooves. Comparing her painting to a photo of the preserved buffalo, I appreciate the distance between the dead animal she saw and the living animal she painted. Vulnerable, imploring, the buffalo stares out of the painting and layers of meaning crystallize for me as I gaze back. I am moved by Snelling's deep sympathy for the animal, and the Vietnamese people's identification with the buffalo as a symbol of their endurance, and the buffalo's sacrifice in providing milk, meat and labor. Elizabeth's buffalo stands on a sharply tilted checkered floor, inspired by the one in the museum, reminding me of California artist Joan Brown's frequent use of the checkerboard motif. Ms. Brown is also famous for painting iconic domestic animals and for using flattened, oriental space and patterns.

Joan Brown and Alice Neel succeeded in the male-dominated art world in the '60s and '70s by portraying people as women see them. Building on feminism, Snelling goes further and puts sympathy to work, making open and equal transactions between subject and painter and between subject and viewer. At one time sympathy would have been considered a feminine weakness; today, it's now a powerful portrait-making tool.

—Elizabeth Johnson