

Maggie Neale: Turning Life into Art

by Cynthia Close

Maggie Neale has accomplished many things in her lifelong pursuit of living creatively, but perhaps the most amazing thing is that she has financially supported herself with her artwork and successfully raised two sons—all at the same time.

It is extremely difficult to make a living as an artist. This fact can be proven by statistics when comparing the number of graduates from art schools and university art departments across the country with the number still making art and selling enough of their work to support themselves in the years following their graduation. Most artists I know have all resorted at some point in their careers to other lines of work to pay the bills. Many, both men and women, have married lawyers or doctors—lucrative professions that could easily sustain a family when one partner chooses to be true to his or her art. Not to disparage marrying well, as this type of couple arrangement has proven to be satisfactory for both sides for decades, but it doesn't work for everyone.

Openings for academic positions in studio art or professorships at the college level are extremely competitive. They are available for the chosen few who have MFAs and impressive exhibition credentials earned early on. Often, the demands of academia drain the energy from the artwork. Perhaps the comfortable, dependable salary makes it too easy to live, and the pressure to make art dissipates.

Some young artists add training in more commercially viable art forms, like graphic design, advertising, or, in more recent years, web design—figuring they would work for money in a related field and pursue their own work in their free time. Others take a different approach, working in a job with flexible hours and few demands on their intellect, like waitressing, driving a taxi, or bartending, reserving their most significant waking hours for art.

But Maggie Neale focused on art making, and while she admitted she was often “living on the edge,” she had enough faith in herself to stick with it, even when the going got tough.

An Artist in the Making

Although I think it is possible to teach art techniques, true artists are born that way, and Maggie Neale is a perfect example. She grew up in Ohio on her family's fruit and vegetable farm, where her father hired migrant workers to pick the strawberries, peaches, apples, and plums that they raised. Neale remembers her early attachment to the tools of art making when she colored and drew before she walked and before she was potty trained. Both her grandmother and mother encouraged her creativity. They were productive in their own way with textiles, particularly sewing and knitting.

Combining a creative bent with entrepreneurial ingenuity was also an early indication that Neale would succeed in her creative endeavors. She always loved making things, and in the second grade she turned her interest in organizing colors to producing potholders woven on one of those little metal looms that many of us remember from our childhoods. She then convinced the owner of a local men's shop to carry her potholders, and soon they sold out! Clearly, the realization that strangers valued her work enough to pay for it made a lasting impression.

In high school, she continued her art studies with a focus on painting and watercolor technique. Although she was not discouraged from pursuing art in college, her father did suggest she study commercial art and graphic design as insurance against a life of artistic poverty. She went on to get her BFA from Bowling Green State University, about 15 miles south of



photo: Jan Doerler

Maggie Neale, wearing a silk jacket and scarf of her making, stands next to a rack of her painted silk creations.

Toledo, Ohio. The school had a strong education program, so along with her art, Neale added teacher prep courses, which likely helped to satisfy her parents' concerns for her future.

Upon graduation, Neale spent a few years teaching art to large classes of between 30 and 50 students. She felt the pressure that many artists feel when they turn to teaching. With little time left for her own art making, she realized

ceramics, and music, as well as learning about Japanese culture.

Her experience with Aso had a profound influence on Neale. She remembers one painting class where the students were presented with a dead fish on a platter as subject matter for painting a still-life. At first glance the students felt challenged by this untraditional idea of beauty. Then Aso spoke about this subject in spiritual terms, enabling his students to make connections between the literal and the poetic aspects of their visual world. Neale recalls another assignment where the students were asked to paint “1,000 birds flying.” This image remained in Neale's mind, influencing her thinking years later.

Weaving in NYC

But as often happens, even in the pursuit of art, life intervenes.

Neale found herself pregnant. For someone whose love of growing things was nurtured on a farm in Ohio, Boston



she had to make a change. Her soul, the very essence of her identity, was fed by making art, and without it, she was very unhappy.

1,000 Birds Flying

To make the life changes necessary to bring her in closer contact with the greater art community, Neale and a friend took off for Kalamazoo, Michigan, a city with twice the population of Burlington, Vermont, but still small by most national standards. Their plan was to open an art gallery—a pretty ambitious undertaking for two young artists with little professional art world experience. This was during the early 1970s, when the notion of “art” began to meld with “craft,” so their enterprise included pottery and even macramé necklaces, which Neale made.

It was in Michigan that Neale met her future husband, a poet. They decided to move to Boston, a city rich in history as well as creative opportunities. Here Neale took watercolor and calligraphy courses with the renowned Japanese artist, poet, and philosopher Kaji Aso. Aso, the founder of the Kaji Aso Studio, died in 2006, but his studio continues to be a popular educational center for courses in painting, poetry,

seemed unaccommodating, particularly as a place for children, so she and her husband drove north to Vermont, in search of a place to settle. It was 1976, and they picked Chelsea, a small town in Orange County, Vermont, near the dead center of the state. As luck would have it, Chelsea was home to one of the few doctors who agreed to perform a home birth, which was Neale's preference. Her firstborn was a son.

Although Chelsea offered plenty of room to garden, Neale was eager to continue her artistic endeavors along-

side motherhood. She tried painting, but having a toddler messing around, getting covered in paint, was an unintended consequence.

It was the rediscovery of the early pleasure she had as a child weaving potholders that led her to explore the creative and economic possibilities inherent in weaving large swaths of material on a large blanket loom. She had taken two weaving courses in college, so the medium was not new to her. She met two other Vermont women who were also interested in starting a weaving group.

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—Maggie Neale

Making money from this venture was one of the goals; they were not in a position to do it for fun or for aesthetic fulfillment alone. To be practical, they made clothing from their woven fabrics, mostly cotton, silk, and scarfs of chenille. They made some inroads selling out of their studio and in the few shops in Chelsea, but not at a scale ample enough to support themselves, so they set their sights on New York City, one of the largest markets within driving distance of Vermont.

With her handwoven clothing in tow, Neale and her creative collaborators headed to the Big Apple, where they set up shop on the sidewalk outside the American Museum of Natural History. This was during the heyday of informal street kiosks of arts and crafts selling on nearly every corner. Soon the weavers from Vermont had lines forming to buy their products. Neale managed to support herself and her family with her weaving for eight years, during which time she gave birth to a second son.

Color Musings

In 1994–1995 Neale combined her love of color with textiles and began painting on silk. She was inspired to establish herself under the moniker “Color Musings” in 1995, as a direct result of a workshop with the influential avant-garde New York-based artist Nick Cave, whose work spans mediums and balances the practical with the fanciful. Her artistic self bloomed, which was evident in her voice when she told me, “The silks brought out the butterfly in me.” She moved into using abstract forms with relative ease; perhaps this harkened back to the spiritual training and visionary inspiration she picked up at the Kaji Aso Studio back in Boston.

Neale's reference to the “butterfly in her” may also have roots all the way back to her childhood on the farm where her love of living things tied to the beauty inherent in nature was nurtured. Experimenting with fiber-reactive dyes and the effects they have on different qualities of silk is fascinating to Neale. She pins and layers the fabric, like expansive canvases, on padded tables and observes how the dyes migrate through the layers. Each piece of fabric is an original painting, signed and dated. Some pieces are more suggestive of clothing designs, making what she calls “happenstance clothing” from the results—truly “art to wear.” It was her success with painting on silk that helped to send her two boys to college.

Painting as Journey

Moving to Montpelier presented more opportunities for community engagement. In 1998 Neale was one of the founders of Studio Place Arts (SPA) in Barre, where she had a studio. She collaborated with a group of artists who set out to rescue a historically important but neglected and fire-damaged building on Main Street in order to create a welcoming space for art making, learning, and exhibition. SPA opened in 2000. Neale ran the SPA gallery while continuing to teach classes and working in her studio, which included painting on canvas. In 2004 she traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico, where she rented a studio and focused on painting without the distractions of community work. The series she created in Mexico was exhibited in Vermont upon her return and also shown in Prescott, Arizona.

While Neale can look back on a long and creative life, having successfully raised two sons who are now doing important environmentally concerned

work, her drive to make art continues unabated.

“I want to address the communication between forms, show the dance or movement, and let that movement keep happening. With eyesight that is weak, I leave the details out, hoping the energy of the action will speak and invite the viewer into the game of the painting.” Her choice of medium is to some extent driven by the seasons. She also has to meet the demand from her collectors and customers who have grown in number over the years. She tends to weave in the fall, uses the winter months after the holiday rush to paint in oils, but does painting on silk year-round. Painting is her therapy, and color is her inspiration.

Always looking forward, Maggie Neale feels “painting is a game with oneself, a journey, an energy erupting, a joy, a lasting memory, and something to ponder into the night.” She would like to find another residency opportunity, perhaps in Iceland, and to do more traveling in Asia. She'd like to visit Japan and China. But in the meantime, you can see and purchase her work directly through her website www.colormusings.com and at the Artisans Hand Craft Gallery in Montpelier, Frog Hollow State Craft Center in Burlington and Middlebury, Gallery on the Green in Shelburne, Textures Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona, Geneva Welch Gallery in Little Washington, Virginia, and Long River Gallery in Lyme, New Hampshire.

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