

ON A KNIFE-EDGE

Hannah Shergold is anything but your typical sporting artist, says Patrick Tillard. Not only has she served in the army as a Lynx helicopter pilot, but she stumbled across her niche in an ever-growing sector by happy accident.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDY BARNHAM

It's fast apparent that Hannah Shergold's Sporting Artist story is a slightly different one. We're 10 minutes into our chat in her home-studio in Winchester, and I'm perched on the edge of the sofa, eyes fixed wide as she recounts one of the two occasions in her career as a Lynx helicopter commander in the Air Corps that she was *genuinely* scared.

"When the soldiers were doing live firing practice in the north of Kenya, we would move up with them so we were close," she starts. "You had to be there. In that part of the country, soldiers were far more active, frequently succumbing to the heat or getting into tussles with the wildlife.

"When you first get out into the bush, you're given a brief on what to do when you encounter certain animals. For lions: make lots of noise, clap metal tins and scare them. For elephants: run away bravely."

But on one particularly wet night, when the rain was falling in sheets as it only does in Kenya, Hannah got a call over the radio that an officer had got the two mixed up and was locked in a squabble with an elephant.

"He had come across a mother with a baby," Hannah resumes. "She was already annoyed that 10 soldiers had run in front of her, but it didn't help that he stood there and started hollering at her, trying to scare her. She mock-charged him, but he didn't move. So she charged for real. His solution was to grab her trunk and hold on for dear life. The radio chatter was: 'She's charging. Oh my god, he's holding on'."

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The officer was gashed by her tusks and flung to the ground before being trampled. He was lucky – she missed his chest and head, but de-gloved his arm. “By the time we arrived he had lost a lot of blood,” Hannah says, “and it was at last light too – and in Kenya, when it’s dark it’s *very* dark.”

Having loaded the officer into the Lynx, they made for Nairobi. “As it happened, it was the worst weather I’ve ever flown in. We can’t fly into cloud as there’s no radar service to get us back out of it safely, and there’s a minimum height you can fly at to keep a safe distance from the ground. So the window between cloud and land was getting smaller and smaller. The rain was so heavy the windscreen



went green through my night-vision goggles, so we couldn’t see enough to land either. It was one of those times where you finish the flight and thank god you’re all still alive.”

While it is a gripping anecdote to kick off the interview, it was just another day in the office for Hannah. But it wasn’t planned; an army career wasn’t something she had set her sights on as a child, as so many others do. She studied pre-clinical Veterinary Medicine at Cambridge, and quickly established herself as a talented animal sculptor; her meticulous eye for anatomy and composition lending itself perfectly to the art. It was all going swimmingly until 2008, when the credit crunch fell like a concrete slab on small luxury businesses that appealed to people’s desire rather than need.

“I suddenly found myself in a tough place,” Hannah says. “I had a really good degree and could have gone into the city, but I was 23, and it was the perfect time to re-train in pretty much anything. A friend was going through Sandhurst and it just

sounded like a good challenge, so I thought why not.”

Hannah wasted no time. She applied in January 2009, had her briefing in February, the mainboard exam in April, and turned up at Sandhurst with her ironing board on May 4. It was the beginning of what was to become a pretty intense and distinguished nine years. On finishing Sandhurst she applied to the Air Corps, an 18-month undertaking to get her Wings, which featured challenges intended to push candidates to breaking point, both mentally and physically. Hannah is admirably modest about her achievements, but only the most competent make it the whole way through training to qualify as Lynx or Apache pilots. She opted for the former, “low-level, sneaking around at night and hiding a helicopter”, and served in Germany, Canada, Kenya and Afghanistan before



leaving in April of this year.

So, you’re probably wondering, where does the art fit into all this?

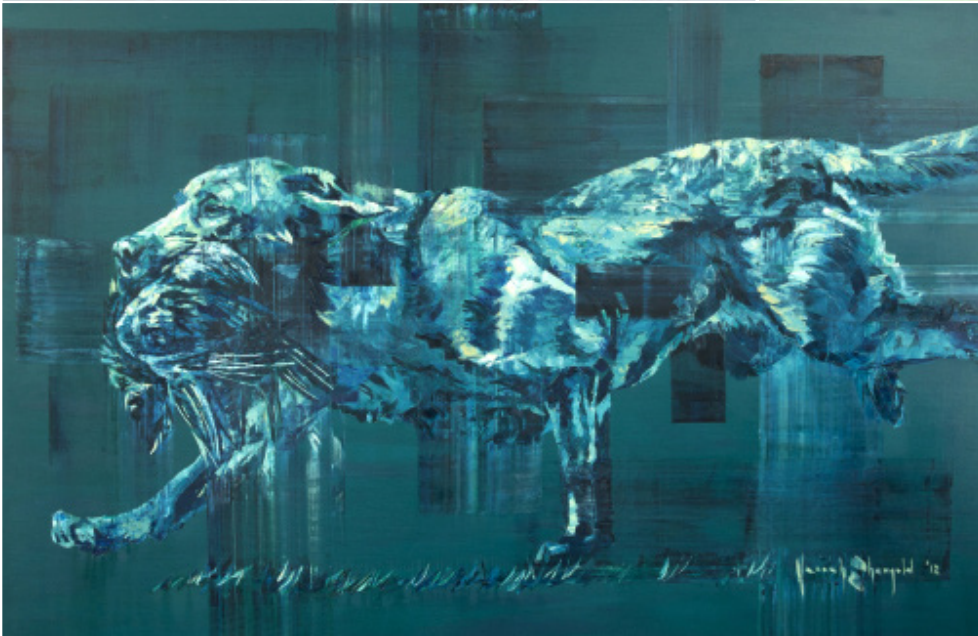
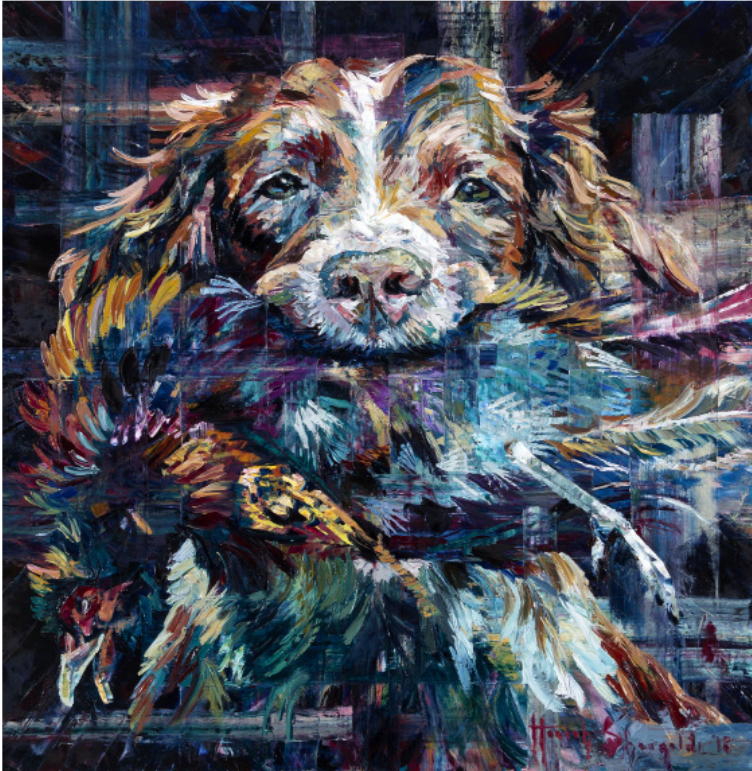
“When I was sent out to Kenya in 2013,” Hannah explains, “medical evacuations were my primary job, but I was also the second-in-command of the squadron, so I had an office job as well. That took up a lot of time, but was more regular hours so I could explore hobbies outside of that. It was too hot for outdoor activities a lot of the time, and when it rained it became so muddy that it was like being on ice. So I stayed inside and sketched.”

Hannah started by sketching camp life around her: vehicles; helicopters; soldiers; local markets. She points to the wall where she has framed several of these postcard-sized works.

“I then moved into watercolours and painted wildlife. Someone saw my pictures and offered to run an exhibition for me in their restaurant in Nanyuki [a market town in Laikipia County]. I advertised it, mainly within the army community, and we had an opening night and two-week showing. I sold 11 pieces. Not for masses of money, but it was a start. I then carried on painting when I came back to the UK.”

Five years later, her sketching has avalanched into a full-time art career; her works have been sold internationally; she has done pieces for WWF and the Invictus Games Foundation; and she has recently hosted her first solo London exhibition in the heart of Mayfair. You get the impression there’s a very exciting road ahead for Hannah.

The mark of any true artist is to be recognised by a particular style. ➡



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Achieving this niche, however, in an age of over-sharing and saturated markets, can be something of a unicorn hunt. Hannah is happy to admit that she found hers by chance. “I am a massive fan of the happy accident,” she jokes. “I finished an oil painting of an elephant and thought: ‘I wonder what happens if I scrape all the paint off it...’”

And herein lies her individuality; her niche that makes a Hannah Shergold a Hannah Shergold. Essentially, Hannah finishes a painting, and then skilfully disfigures it with palette knives and a wooden ruler, making different layers more prominent than others. The resulting lines of blurred paint, both vertical and horizontal, inject incredible energy and movement into the scene – the hounds are quite literally jumping from the canvas; you can visualise the two cock pheasants spiralling into the air as they spar; and you feel the weight of the felled stag atop the garron as it heads for home. It’s incredibly effective. As her style develops she has taken this a step further, and now paints with palette knives from start to finish; not a brush in sight.

“The movement is achieved by scraping at different pressures,” Hannah explains. “Some lines just work first time, some don’t. Oh for an edit-undo button! I do everything when the paint is wet as it still moves. After that it gets a bit sticky and the knives don’t slide through the paint as I want them to.”

In addition to this fresh approach, Hannah is not averse to challenging tradition. She shows me into

another room where a painting of two stags hangs on the wall – the primary colour is orange; a far cry from the dulcet tones we ordinarily associate with the hill.

“People like the change,” Hannah says. “It’s refreshing, it’s different. It’s not necessarily something they knew they wanted, but pheasants don’t have to be brown with a red head; they can be pink and purple and green and blue. It still looks like a pheasant.”

The artistic endeavour behind the paintings starts well before the first palette knife touches the canvas. Hannah begins in Photoshop, combining numerous photos, layers and colours to get a clear view of

the scene she is going to capture. Such is the motion she is looking to convey, this requires thinking outside of the box: with her boxing hares, for example, a huge two-metre piece, six individual bucks are blurred to be only two to the eye. The result illustrates the explosive strength that goes into these violent matches.

Her veterinary degree can be something of a hinderance, never allowing her to be creative with the truth. “I have a fascination with composition,” she says. “Which means I do nothing at the expense of the anatomy. The movement, the muscles, the positions must all be perfect.”

For her next theme, Hannah is flicking back to where it all started: Africa and its myriad wildlife. She sees a huge amount of potential to use her style to great effect – “cheetah and lions hunting; the ruckus of the kill. There is so much energy to it all.” This most likely means a return to her old stomping grounds in Kenya, albeit in a very different capacity, swapping helicopter controls for oil and ink as she studies the intricacies of how these big cats move, hunt and interact. But her old training will still be beneficial; she knows what to do if she comes face-to-face with an angry elephant.

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