

Joy in Transcendence

Artist Anne Elliott uses rice paper to re-create the world's highest peaks

THE first thing you see when you walk into the Silva Gallery at the Pennington School is a wall of caves, complete with a waterfall.

Well, OK, the artist hasn't really moved mountains, but she has climbed them, and this is a representation built from Anne Elliott's imagination and hands. Rather than an authentic replica, the works re-create what it feels like to be in the mountains: "the sheer presence, the atmosphere, the living existence of the place," writes Ms. Elliott.

The Lawrence resident has developed a technique for suggesting rock out of rice paper. The installation here took her a full week, sewing together long ribbons of rice paper with tarlatan, a printmaker's cloth that is like a stiff cheesecloth, sandwiched inside. It's all suspended with an intricate series of invisible nylon thread.

Talk about becoming your subject! Landscape has always been at the heart of her work, ever since studying art at Sarah Lawrence College in the 1960s. She used to create "identifiable" landscape paintings of the American West, but in the 1970s, when she traveled to the Grand Canyon for a two-week trip, "I got up close and personal with the rocks, and realized I couldn't do that with painting so starting cutting and folding and painting paper to create layers.

"I kept going to spectacular places, and needed to express what I saw there," she continues.

This petite woman with finely sculpted features, who lays out pages for *Town Topics* one day a week, has climbed 25 peaks in the Adirondacks, Wheeler Peak in New Mexico and Thunder Mountain in California. Recently, with her daughter, she climbed to the base camp of Mount Rainier in Washington. She has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya, and trekked as far as base camp on Chomolhari in Bhutan (also with her daughter) and K2 in Pakistan. With her son she has traveled to the Galapagos Islands, and did the Tour du Mont Blanc with her husband, Peter Gruen, a professor of philology at The College of New Jersey. "He likes climbing but not camping," she says.

"The higher I go, the higher I get," Ms. Elliott writes on her Web site. "It is joy in transcendent natural environments that drives (my) work."

The artist took her first trip out west when her college roommate moved to Santa Fe. "I was blown away by the Grand Canyon, fell in love with the West and went every summer," she says. Ms. Elliott was a guest on a working barge going up the Mississippi. The noise from the engine was deafening, but it was worth the while for the beautiful landscapes.

"Idaho is a well-kept secret," says the Pittsburgh native. "It's one of the most beautiful places on earth."

She has floated 800 miles on Alaska's Yukon River. "It was 799 miles too long," she reflects.

"I love being outside, hiking, and being in the mountains, and feel deprived living in the East," adds Ms. Elliott, who lived in New York City in the late '80s and early '90s (she moved to Princeton in 1992). "And I'm inspired by what I see."

She traveled to Kenya in 1976 and climbed 19,000 feet to the highest peak in Mt. Kilimanjaro. "I do very well at high peaks," she says, seeming to have an innate immunity to altitude sickness. "I was meant to be on a mountain."

In climbing school, she learned the importance of setting out early enough in the day so as not to get stranded by nightfall, as happened on Mount Everest in 1996, when 15 climbers died (chronicled by Jon Krakauer in *Into Thin Air*). Ms. Elliott prefers walking to climbing with ropes.



Clockwise from top left: "Requiting Kindness Grotto," "Cloud Dispelling Cave," "Cave of the Deer King" and "Cave of the Dharma Sermon."



Then, in 1977, she went on a trek to Pakistan and climbed 16,000 feet to the base camp of K2, the second highest mountain on earth (second to Everest).

Ms. Elliott walked on a glacier outside the polar ice cap for three weeks. It was difficult to find a flat place to pitch a tent on the surface, and stones kept falling from the mountains. There were 100 porters for 15 trekkers, including two doctors who would stop in villages to treat patients in need. And then, of course, it was another three weeks back.

In 2006, Ms. Elliott and her daughter, Skye Elliott Gruen, an engineer, traveled to the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, an oasis at the religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road, and the 36 peaks of Huangshan (the Yellow Mountain) southwest of Shanghai. "It looked like being in a continual Chinese painting," says the artist.

Cut into the living rock by sculptors, the Mogao Caves are Buddhist shrines with thousands of frescoes and statues used for devotion and inspiration. "Huangshan has endless stone steps and paths that wind through rock, crag and mist, offering numerous sites for contemplation and artistic inspiration," writes Ms. Elliott. Here, she re-creates these with rice paper that has splatters of metallic paint to look like composite rock, with its sparkles.

Folds of paper suggest steps, and ladder-like cross-hatchings of paper suggest balcony railings. Individual

cutouts suggest window-like openings in the caves. There are also topographical suggestions of the landscapes with cutout ridges.

Titles of the works evoke the settings: "Ascending Stones," "Cloud Dispelling Cave," "Requiting Kindness Grotto," "Seeking Visiting Scholars' Cave," "Walkway to Zen Meditation Cave." Ms. Elliott has painted a Buddha into "Sleeping Buddha Cave."

The adventure traveler was impressed by the fitness of the Chinese people she saw climbing Yellow Mountain, day after day — even grandmothers going up and down the steps with ease. Ms. Elliott keeps in shape by exercising at Robert Wood Johnson in Hamilton, as well as taking long walks through the woods near her home in Lawrence.

So being perched on a ladder for a week to install her own craggy cliffs and waterfalls was a piece of cake. "It's living on the edge," she says. "Labor intensive, but fun. It doesn't have to look like anything but what I remember. This is my idea of a good time." ●

Immortal Mountains, Hallowed Caves: Landscape Evocations of Anne Elliott is on view at the Silva Gallery on the campus of The Pennington School, 112 W. Delaware Ave., Pennington, through Feb. 5. Gallery hours: Mon.-Thurs. 1-5 p.m. or by appointment. (609) 737-8069, ext. 400; www.pennington.org; www.anne-elliott.com