

Clayton Patterson

Elsa

As Elsa, referring to our relationship, says in *Captured*: “It was not love at first sight.” Because I was going out with a friend of hers. All of that changed. We started living together in 1972 and we are still living together. My major blessing going to art college was meeting Elsa Rensaa.

I was the visionary who set the goals. Elsa was the tactician who figured out how to make it all work. I was chaos and she was order. As long as my goal had achievement, merit and purpose, she was willing to go along with my adventures. I had big plans, but getting started was not all that easy, because I came from the bad end of the working class. I left home between grades 9 and 10. In and out of high school. Not sure I ever graduated, but was accepted into an art college. My first exposure to the middle class almost killed me. But it was here I met Elsa.

Elsa is a wonderful soul, an inspired and highly talented artist, who needs to be understood and discovered outside of me. She is a recluse—never saw much of a point in being social. She is pleasant, friendly, good to be around, but she’s always had enough of her own projects to keep her occupied. I became the front person, and she was content to be somewhat invisible. As she says in *Captured*: “We are Clayton,” which is true. She saved my life. Without her, who knows where I would have ended up? Everything I have become I owe to her friendship, guidance, inspiration, love and belief in me.

Elsa was born in Norway and her father moved to Canada after WW2. Her father was a fisherman who came from a small fishing village above the Arctic Circle in Norway. Like many immigrants, he started as a laborer, and in his case, did track work for the railway. Working hard, saving money, learning a new language, studying, going to school, he eventually made his way into the University Manitoba engineering department. After graduating, he moved to Edmonton, Alberta, and partnered with Fred Minsos, a Danish architect.

As a team, they were able to secure a number of government projects: they designed and built

bridges and water towers, designed the main terminal of Edmonton International Airport, the 1967 Stanley Milner Library, and so on. He was awarded a government-of-Canada gold medal for engineering.

Elsa’s was an intellectual family that focused on education and achievement and not on money. They were comfortable middle class. The Alberta government was a combination of socialism and capitalism. The majority of her father’s work was on government projects, and her sister worked in a teaching hospital on a set salary.

Elsa’s father would support any area of study she was interested in pursuing. Elsa’s love was art. She graduated with honors and got a job as the commercial artist in the largest printing company in Western Canada. She also became a four-color stripper. In commercial printing, only four printing plates are used. All the colors are made from combinations of four colors—CMYK: cyan, magenta, yellow, and key (black). A stripper is an expert on how these color combinations work.

It can be a mystery how different experiences and chance situations can become vehicles of change. In 1972, for my birthday, Elsa gave me a 35mm single-lens reflex Pentax camera she’d purchased as one of those drugstore loss-leader items offered to attract customers. It was that camera that got me inside the Pyramid and opened the door to so many of my later adventures.

In 1976, I got accepted into the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. I specialized in printmaking. Elsa was not interested in getting a degree, but she took stone lithography courses.

Since she understood how four-color printing worked, she decided to experiment and see how many printing passes it would take to make multicolored prints. After some experimentation, she learned how light and how dense to make a drawing to achieve different color combinations, and which colors to use to get maximum color results.

Our printmaking experience gave us entry into NYC. We moved here in 1979. We got jobs working at a

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fine-art printing shop. Reagan was elected president and he made fine-art prints a tax shelter. Paloma Picasso sold to a major corporate art company the reproduction rights to a number of her father's artworks. The company turned some of them into hand-pulled lithographs. In the French fine-art print world, there is a specialist known as a chromist. A chromist is a craftsman who can reproduce an original artwork as a fine-art print. There were few chromists in NYC. Elsa fit the bill. Elsa produced many Picassos. The job paid well.

I worked as a building manager for our landlord. I was the hook-up guy. Someone needed a plumber, I got a plumber, and so on. I learned something about running a building. In 1982, we lived on the Bowery. Working for this landlord, I saw the Chinese money crossing Canal Street and knew we would not be able to afford to pay rent in NYC as working artists. We spent a year looking for a building to buy. We found a two-story building on Essex Street. We went to 42 banks and could not get a mortgage. I had a plan: two stories, the first floor had a sewing factory. The first-floor rent would cover the mortgage payments. Elsa, alone, went up to the vice president of Citibank's corporate office and talked to his secretary. After a few phone calls, we got the mortgage.

In 1986, a small baseball-cap-making and embroidery business existed on Ave A. I was a ready-made customer. I experimented with a couple of color combinations. He was making an embroidery patch for Savage Skull. It was a moment of inspiration—he could draw with his embroidery machine. My next request was something he had never done before. But with a little work and persuasion, I was able to create the Clayton Cap.

The owner retired. The garment business was leaving NYC. At the bankruptcy auctions we were able to buy all the sewing machines needed to manufacture the Clayton Cap. In the past, Elsa had taken craft courses. She was skilled with a sewing machine. She learned how to use the antique embroidery machine and became an expert cap maker. I created the rough designs and she transformed the images into embroidery.

Again the two of us working together at home. We survived by making the caps. We generated some fame and loyal customers. The Clayton Cap introduced many changes to the American baseball cap.

On the night of August 6–7, 1988, the night of the police riot, Elsa was my right-hand person. She would take tapes home and charge batteries. She made it possible for me to make our historic 3h33' video. During the years of political turbulence on the LES, Elsa was always my backup, my right hand, the person I gave the camera to as I was being arrested. I got arrested, she never did. She supported me in just about all of the political work. She organized the photo-and-video archive.

In 1986, Ari Roussimoff and I had created the Tattoo Society of New York. In 1990, Ari moved on and Elsa and I ran the TSNY. The TSNY, Wes Wood, and Councilwoman Kathryn Freed worked on legalizing tattooing in NYC. By the end of 1997, tattooing was once again legal in NYC and the society took a hiatus. In 1998, Steve Bonge, Butch Garcia, and Wes Wood created the New York International Tattoo Convention. Elsa and I both worked for the convention. Elsa designed the invitation for the first several years.

She always made art. Her paintings have an original style. They are exquisite, and artists are amazed at how far she has been able to push the use of acrylic paint. Because oil paints are slower drying, most artists model and blend colors using oil paints. Through experimentation, Elsa discovered a way to get the desired effect using acrylics. Her work operates on a number of different levels. Her attention to detail is awe-inspiring. The work is tight, well-thought-out, always pushing for a level of perfection. If something does not satisfy her, she does the whole thing over again.

Our art lays bare a lot about who we are. Exposes a truth we believe in. Whatever truth we may be seeking. A work of art goes beyond surface. It exposes our inner being, our soul, our loves and hates, our imagination, our beliefs, our character, our integrity. If you want to get a glimpse into who Elsa Rensaa is, look at her paintings.