

ART THROUGH TRAGEDY

Artist rebuilds life's work after devastating fire

By Sylvia Sheehan
Correspondent

Nothing can be more devastating than losing your home in a fire, especially when your life's work also goes up in flames. For Suzy Elsworth-Heithcock — an artist who has devoted her life creating unique photo-realistic object paintings — the worst thing imaginable happened.

While enjoying a weekend getaway in 2009 with her family on the Mendocino coast, she received a devastating call from her mother that her house was on fire.

The accidental fire was caused by house painters' oil rags left underneath the house, next to the generator on a hot summer day: the perfect conditions for a spontaneous combustion.

By the time the family got home, they learned the fire destroyed their home, killed four of their five cats, and ravaged most of their personal effects.

Nothing was salvageable.

The shock and trauma caused Elsworth-Heithcock's mother, who lives next door, to go into cardiac arrest. Fortunately, the fire chief was nearby to respond quickly and get her to a hospital. She was released after a four-day stay.

"Luckily, my mom was OK, but this (fire) was too big of a concept to absorb right away," Elsworth-Heithcock said. "You think you will understand it, but even after a while, you keep reaching for things that aren't there anymore. It took me three weeks before I finally realized all my artwork was gone, and then it was like someone just punched me in the stomach."

Painting for more than three decades, Elsworth-Heithcock used her vast experience of learning and living abroad as inspiration for her original work.

She was born to American parents living in Switzerland, grew up in the Canary Islands,

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Suzy Elsworth-Heithcock solo show

WHEN: 8 a.m.-5 p.m. through Aug. 14

WHERE: Walnut Creek City Hall, 1666 N. Main St.

speaking mostly Spanish before moving back to the States after her father died from lung cancer on Christmas Day, when she was 10.

Her mother remarried a Philadelphia lawyer and they moved from California to Pennsylvania before Elsworth-Heithcock headed to college at the University of Wisconsin. Halfway through college, she transferred to the California College of Arts and Crafts, majoring in general art.

After graduation, she mostly worked as a waitress in Oakland, Berkeley and the wine country, painting in her spare time. During this period, she met her husband, J.G. Heithcock, another food server who later became a software engineer.

She and her husband were big book collectors and traveled extensively. They acquired many items over the years, including thousands of books, mementos, and unique pieces like a silk rug from Turkey.

And then, poof, in an instant, it was all gone, said Elsworth-Heithcock.

The only silver lining from the tragedy was that she was able to design her dream home.

"My focus was looking forward, to not look backward, so I was working with people building our house, acquiring every stick of furniture, every (piece of) clothing, every lamp, and I spent two years shopping, designing," she recalled.

"But the first few years we lived here, I felt like we were living in a very pretty hotel. When you have a home, you have things your family has given you, you



COURTESY OF PETER FOUCAULT

Suzy Elsworth-Heithcock has a solo show of her paintings at Walnut Creek City Hall until Aug. 14.

have things your husband's family has given you. Things you have picked up in your travels, bought yourself, and full of special memories."

Before the fire, she was also busy preparing her art portfolio to submit for art gallery solo shows. The paintings were of meticulously detailed work, mostly of objects like rock formations and door knockers in small 8-by-10 format, using pen, ink or oil.

As Elsworth-Heithcock prepared to start over, she suffered another setback. The fire destroyed more than just her life's work. Her health also deteriorated.

The despair and stress of handling the fire's long-term effects crashed her immune system and she became allergic to all types of food. She lost more than 75 pounds and did not leave the house for almost a year.

But slowly she gained her health back by changing her

diet and exercising. She became an avid hiker and kayaker, and discovered newfound passions for the outdoors. She took long hikes, capturing the picturesque, scenic East Bay trails with her camera. The imagery she saw would inspire her to come home and create new works of art.

This is evident in her current work, full of vibrant, fluid, abstract details of nature, evoking movement and motion. She said they are larger in scale and "definitely more alive" than her previous work.

She now feels more confident than ever that she could rebuild something greater — she likes to think of herself as a phoenix rising from the ashes, transformed.

"I am now seeking to show in my artwork the life, the movement ... that everything is always changing. That's the story of my life; and when you look at a painting, you should feel that it's not still. It's changing, it's alive."