

# 'Her death is part of me': the pain behind an artist's gift

Gerard Burns has donated a painting titled Persephone to be raffled during the Macmillan Cancer Support Art Show  
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**He is one of -Scotland's most successful -contemporary artists, whose admirers include Ewan -McGregor, Sir Tom Hunter and Alex Salmond.**

Yet Gerard Burns has revealed that behind his famous images of angels' wings and saltires there is a story of family sadness.

Burns has spoken for the first time about the death of his sister Elaine from cancer and why he has donated one of his works, which normally sell for between £3000 and £50,000, to an art show in aid of Macmillan Cancer Support.

"There's always a temptation when a child dies to over-romanticise, but you couldn't with Elaine," says Burns, speaking at his home in Dullatur, North Lanarkshire.

"She was very, very -beautiful. She was a person who made other people feel good around her – just someone you'd look at and think, 'She's going to be something.'

"My other sister Jeanette and I are both very creative people but the truth of it is you could see that she was all of that and more. You were just kind of waiting for it to happen."

Tragically, it never did. Elaine died in 1979. She was 14, four years younger than Burns, who was then in his first year at Glasgow School of Art. In the years that followed, he tried his hand as a musician and a teacher before finding success as an artist.

He carries old photographs of his sister with him at all times: snapshots, really, the emulsions dulled, the colours faded, the haircuts 1970s-shaped. "When she was in the room, it was like there were five of her," he recalls, the memory brighter than any picture could be.

Against a wall in Burns's home rests his latest -canvas, Persephone, a work that draws on Greek -mythology. The model for the painting was Vassilissa Levtonova, a dancer with Scottish Ballet. A spot just behind Dullatur golf course provided the background.

In the past, Burns has been known for painting angels' wings and saltires into his canvases. Both can be seen in some of the half-finished -paintings in his studio. The 48-year-old's work -surrounds him; indeed, he is marked by his profession, his black top speckled with white paint, his trousers smeared in yellow.

Life has marked him, too, but not so visibly. "This word 'cancer' has featured so large in my life," he says. "But I'm sure every single person, every adult you speak to, will have been hurt by this thing."

Six months before she died, Elaine was diagnosed with a frozen shoulder. The pain didn't get any better, but by the time X-rays were finally carried out, it was too late. The cancer was in her bones and spreading. She died soon after. "It became hell as it became obvious where it was going, but it was so brief. I think the strain it put on my parents was -unimaginable," says Burns.

For the past five years, Burns has been selling -paintings through a group of volunteers in aid of -Macmillan Cancer Support. He has submitted about 10 works each year, with 50% of the purchase price going to Macmillan.

This year he donated a painting worth £5000 to be raffled during the group's 25th art show. So far the 2009 exhibition has raised £120,000; over the last -quarter of a century the volunteer group, called Glasgow '84, has raised

£2m for Macmillan.

It is an organisation Burns believes offers vital support for cancer victims and their families – support his family didn't have when Elaine was sick.

"My mum had to borrow cars to get her back and forth. It was a nightmare," he says. "These charities are very practical, and for -Macmillan to go in and -provide that level of support at that most horrendous time I think is amazing."

It has been three decades since Elaine's death but Burns believes the imprint of the loss will never go away. "The thing about any kind of loss, particularly the loss of a child or a young person, is it becomes part of who you are. You don't ever outgrow it. It simply becomes part of what you wake up with in the morning. And you either absorb it and it becomes part of your strength or it can eat away at you. It became a force that drove me in my life."

It is also a force that has shaped what he has painted. "I was listening to a writer on the radio this morning who realised two-thirds of the way through a book that he was writing about his father, who had committed -suicide. He didn't realise that's what he was doing when he started.

"When I look at my body of work, it's so obvious. Angels is a new series based on the myth of Persephone. At its core, it's about the death of a young woman."

**Award-winner whose work hangs behind the First Minister**

Born in Glasgow in 1961, Gerard Burns graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1983, with a degree in fine art.

He taught as principal of art at St Aloysius' College, Glasgow, before leaving to pursue his painting full-time in 1999.

His painting *The Rowan* hangs over First Minister Alex Salmond's desk at the Scottish Parliament building.

His paintings are held in the collections of businessmen Sir Tom Hunter and Sir Philip Green, the actor Ewan McGregor and the Malaysian royal family.

He was the winner of the unofficial Not the Turner Prize award in 2003, which aims to celebrate traditional art.

He says: "My goal is -realism, but it's by increasingly abstract means that realism is attained." Some of his images could be described as photographic.

The Macmillan Art Show continues at M&Co, Caledonia House, Inchinnan, Renfrew, until November 28. For details call 0141 952 0085.