



Ellen Mandelbaum, **South Carolina Aquarium**, 15 ft. high, painted, leaded, stained glass

Teaching “A Brush with Freedom”

By Ellen Mandelbaum

I've collected wonderful brushes over the years and even surprising ones like an afro comb, a Japanese whisk broom, and a shoji brush with a bamboo handle made by a woman from New Jersey. I start the class with a demonstration of my painting and show a selection of my brushes, round, flat, ox hair, badger, and nylon. They are varied—a long-handled bristle brush for vertical stripes, a #5 ox hair tracer for a thin long line. I mix the paint, just water and gum because I like a simple, open approach. Let the paint be paint, and the brush stroke be an expressive brush stroke, allowing for a wide range of expression from calm to more agitated and expressionistic. I pick up the paint, test it on the glass table, paint and watch. Every gesture that's made suggests another. Looking for the next one, I may be inspired by the application of the painted line itself. I keep open the option of spritzing a little water, pulling the line out to open it up into a variegated tone. Over the years I've developed my own quirky way of working—an architect's flex curve instead of a bridge, and always the possibility of pulling it out to open it up, a long straight edge and long bent rebar. Why? The long arc of the rebar keeps the circle open—extending it infinitely. I am watching every brush stroke with concentration and care. Using a light table with bare bulbs so it's like looking at light outside a window and the glass stays alive. Amazing—a pulse of bright light is created when the glass is left bare or I scratch through a mat to release the light, as Albinus Elskus says, “painting with light.”

The demo is the beginning of my small or private classes that I've taught in my studio and elsewhere for the past several years. They have often ended with great mutual appreciation between my students and myself. This is the most exciting thing. I look at the work they've done before the class, and during the class so I can really see them. I watch them the way I watch a brush stroke to see what exciting way it can go next. Then at some point we might talk one-on-one to acknowledge what is good about their work and perhaps to help them imagine what could get better. This is a moment of heart-to-heart, one person to another, passing on what I learned and how I've felt deeply about art throughout my life. I had experiences like that with my teachers, holy moments in the classroom.

In 1981 I was privileged to study with Albinus Elskus, arguably the most important teacher of glass painting. He wrote the seminal book, still available from the Stained Glass Association of America, *The Art Of Painting On Glass*. Albin taught a class at what was then the Stained-Glass School in North Adams, MA. He had us begin, like most glass painting classes, by copying a head, learning to trace lines first, matt next, and be able to brush off the paint afterwards to release the light. He said, “The excitement and joy of painting on glass has its source in the contrast it creates between clear, unpainted areas and the painted, obscure areas. This contrast is the most important and essential quality of painting on glass.” My eye was getting sharp, as it does when I am looking hard. During the break I noticed light falling on a folded plastic bag in the closet—the light against the darkness. I started to paint that. My brushstrokes were not traditional, my attitude modern. I asked, could I finish that instead of the exercise? He said yes. He saw me for who I was and liked it. He let me be me (no one could do a better favor). His glass painting class opened up a new world because I could again do the painting I'd loved all my life. We stayed in touch for years afterwards. He was kind enough to review many of the designs I made for increasingly large spaces. We stayed in touch and I was able to visit him in Maine shortly before he died.

The name of my class came from the title of an article by Gene Mallard in *Professional Stained Glass* in 1990. He talked about me as one of the artists at that time who was creating a new, more adventurous glass painting style, breaking the rules. But it was Kathy Barnard who invented the class. She said she wanted to come from Kansas City to New York to study with me and after several years of erratic communication by email, phone, and Facebook, we finally got together in the summer of 2014. We met in my Long Island City (New York City) studio for a long weekend, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. There was no good hotel near my studio then, but that has changed. Now there are several—The modern “Long Island City Hotel” and “The Local,” an interesting hip space that includes co-ed hostel rooms that recently cost less than \$70/night. Both are a walk away from my studio and from a subway station that goes to the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan in less than 20 minutes. My small classes have run several times a year since then with



PHOTOS THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

wonderful students coming from around the country. A new schedule has just been published.

I was very pleased when Kathy wanted to study with me because I'd come late to stained glass, so I wasn't sure how I could contribute as a teacher. I'd been trained as a fine artist with an MFA in painting and teaching art history and art theory part-time at Hunter College of The City of New York, and as docent of The Whitney Museum of American Art. I had sat quietly by at glass conferences where esoteric paints and painting techniques were discussed. I couldn't imagine how my unique painting would fit in, but bit-by-bit generous colleagues gave me encouragement. At the invitation of Kathy Jordan and Kenneth Leap I presented a glass painting demo for their class in Millville, NJ. I was very pleased, and a bit surprised to discover that many of their students were excited by my way of working freely. In 2014 I gave a demonstration at the American Glass Guild conference in Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania. It was again greeted with enthusiasm. It seemed like people in my field were hungry for brush strokes and expression, not just the prevalent painting techniques that blended paint and obscured the artist's hand.

Several of my former students expressed it this way:

"The biggest thing I took away from her class was her brush stroke technique. Watching her effortless, smooth brushstrokes with the paint was mesmerizing. I had already held the artistic opinion that the first stroke an artist makes is typically the best, but she really drove that home. You can feel the emotions when viewing her work..." –Kara Peer

"I so valued seeing how you approached your work...It was a refreshing change from the technique intensive classes I have taken and teach." –Tony Serviente

"...And more than a glass painting course, this was really a general art course with lots of emphasis on flow and color and tone and free-formed composition, instead of a focus just on technical glass painting fundamentals." –Josh Hendricks

The Syllabus—Beyond Finger Painting

Kathy Barnard took my class along with Claudia Robinson who acted as my assistant. Since the class was called "A Brush With Freedom," it could have been interpreted as just playing with the paint. However, I had no intention of having anyone take a plane from another part of the country, pay for room and board, and then fool around for three days. What I had in my class notes was: "...To explore the range of emotion from calm to more expressionist from a controlled line of beauty made with an ox hair tracer to a more expressionistic brush strokes made with a bristle brush." I now have a syllabus of ways to actually teach this. I have exercises to help the artist be free. I also teach basic technical skills to produce a well

painted panel because the paint still needs to be thin enough to not fry in the kiln. I also include ways to "sharpen the eye" to draw, to see more clearly. Most important, I pay attention and am flexible enough to invent what is needed to teach a special person or class.

The Stained Glass School and On

In 2015 I was invited to teach a class of five at the Stained Glass School in Raytown, MO. In a way, that was a baptism of fire. I think the only members of the class more nervous than I were the students. I resorted to a warming-up exercise, a get to know you exercise: "blind contour drawing." We used pieces of vine charcoal, thin and small enough to fit inside one's fingers, so the strength would come from the arm. Vine charcoal is made from burnt willow branches and is sensitive to every gesture and pressure of the hand. The students would draw each other, looking at the person without looking down at the paper. All the drawings came out looking weird but, to varying degrees, beautiful. I could point out the beauty of line to a student who needed encouragement. To another I could point out that they'd excelled in a more dramatic out-there style. Thus, the connection between the artist's hand and the art began to be clear.

We survived that—then I did a demo of my painting. First, I painted on the light box and then invited them to experiment on that same piece of glass. It got quite messy, but they were encouraged to open up and understand that they didn't have to be perfect. When individual glass pieces were provided for personal expression their imaginations took off and wonderful paintings were made. The enthusiasm was infectious, and everyone agreed that they had learned from one another, and that it had been a great class.

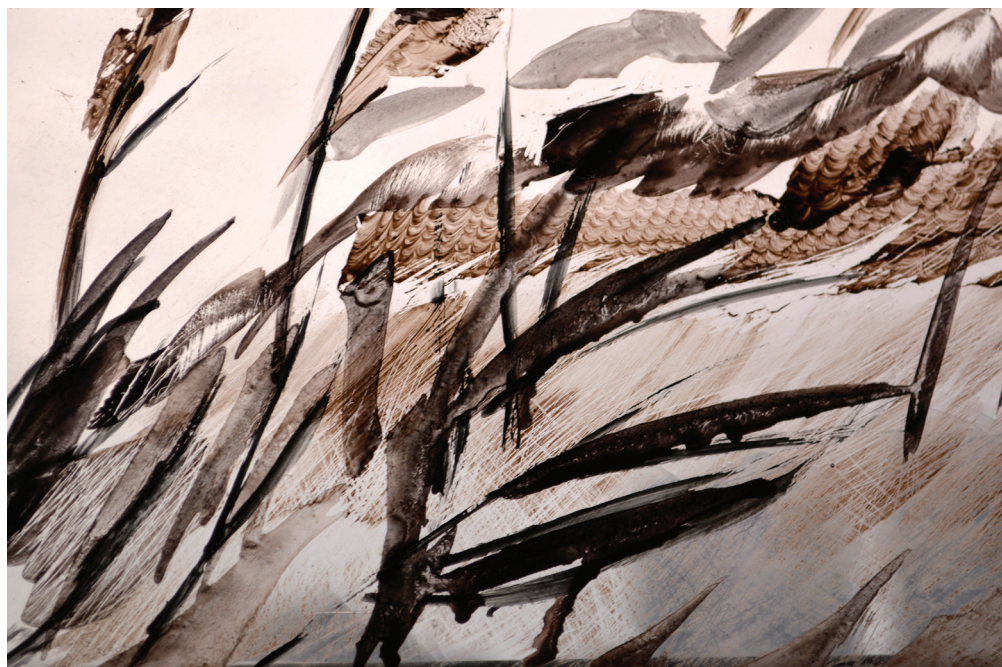
My most recent class took place a few weeks ago with Hilary Harrison and Diane Eissinger. Two accomplished former students, Claudia Robinson and Kara Peer, graciously assisted. I began with a demo as usual, and then showed a slide presentation of architectural commissions that were specifically focused on the beauty of stained glass painting. On three successive days I taught basic skills: first high fire glass stainer colors, then enamels, then silver stain. Clear window glass and a purple tint of GNA were chosen and cut for small personal panels. Diane and Hilary, both professional artists, took off. As my high school art teacher said, "they were cooking with gas!" (We fired my electric Denver Kiln five times in 2 days!) When I arrived the last day, I saw what

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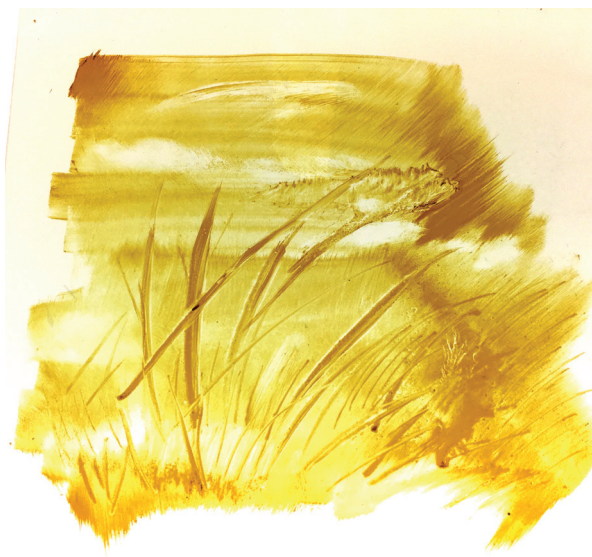
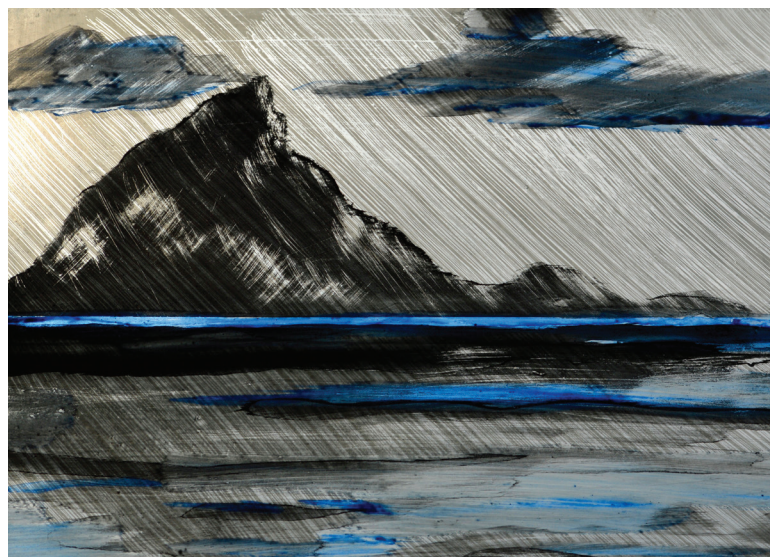
Kathy Barnard, **Grasses**, 12" x 14", stainer colors and silver stain.

Ellen Mandelbaum (left) with Gillian Thompson.

Kathy Barnard painting in the Ellen Mandelbaum's studio.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Hilary Harrison, **Grasses**, 12" x 14",
stainer colors.
Hilary Harrison, **SeaGrass**, 14" x 14",
silver stain.
Diane Eissinger, **Mountain**, 12" x 14",
stainer colors and transparent enamel.



they'd been painting overnight and said, "Make sure you leave some clear glass!" I was remembering what Albinus had said and I knew its importance, "The joy of painting on glass has its source in the contrast it creates between clear, unpainted areas and the painted, obscure areas." So, Diane scratched out a long horizontal line under her painting of a mountain. The next fire she painted celestial blue transparent enamel in its place and it glowed. Hilary had begun painting from a striking photo of grasses. That came out well but the last day she out did herself using Oster Silverstain for a fluent, golden painting, "Sea Grass."

My teaching has been immensely gratifying. Among the artists I've been privileged to teach are: Kathy Barnard, Diane Eissinger, Josh Hendricks, Karen Cannon, Claudia Robinson, Sister Anne Kelly, Kevin O'Brian, Melissa Janda, Kara Peer, Tony Serviente, Nancy Gong, Josephine Geiger,

Barbara Krueger, Gillian Thompson, Saara Gallin, David Sprouse, and Alexandra Lugowska.

Ellen Mandelbaum is a Senior Advisor of The American Glass Guild and an Accredited Artist-Designer of the Stained Glass Association of America. She is internationally recognized for her contemporary glass painting and large stained glass commissions. Mandelbaum has received awards from The American Institute of Architects and The Williamsburg Art & Historical Society, and holds an MFA with honors in painting from Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. Recently she has focused on teaching classes on themes like "A Brush with Freedom" and continues to offer these small and private classes at her NYC studio.

For further information about classes, contact Ellen Mandelbaum directly at ellen@ellenmandelbaum.com, 718-361-8154/cell 917-324-3292. ■