

# DRAWING THINGS TOGETHER:

## Nancy Sutcliffe on a life in engraving

*By Dennis Jarrett*

**“I may be regarded as a glass engraver,”** says Nancy Sutcliffe, “but actually drawing is key to my work. Because I use a hand held drill, there’s literally a direct connection between what I want to do and how I do it. It’s exactly like using a pencil or a brush on paper, and it allows me to achieve a similar level of detail in a very different medium.”

That’s important because detail is crucial to Nancy’s practice. “I’ve always had a meticulous approach to my work generally” she says. “That’s why I took a degree in design specialising in medical and scientific illustration. The need for accuracy really suited me, and I enjoyed reproducing real life with clarity and precision.

“I spent a lot of time drawing, and as things turned out it was a good habit to acquire professionally. There’s a saying amongst engravers: if you can’t draw, you can’t engrave.”

Her degree took her into medical publishing and then to the medical illustration department of a large London teaching hospital where she ran the (very small) art room. The advent of computer graphics was starting to make such departments redundant, but Nancy was ready to move before being pushed. As a freelance illustrator she picked up increasingly more creative and stimulating jobs including book projects for the BBC, school textbooks, and atlases.

Then came another step change: she moved out of London into the depths of rural England. Freelancing in the publishing business was geographically less easy, but Nancy has always reacted to practical constraints by evolving. In the countryside she had room for a sizable studio and a workshop, and she started to develop her own work.

“I became interested in glass as a surface for drawing and I began to experiment with glass paint on a matte finish glass. The demise of the source for that particular glass contributed to an interesting procedural shift. I acquired a sandblasting cabinet and a large compressor to replicate the surface I had been using, this led me in a completely new direction.”

She disliked the actual process of sandblasting because of the noise and dust it produced, but it was the best way to create opaque areas that were then over-painted with delicate designs and lettering—always in white paint on the white glass surface of vessels. The resulting pieces were

FACING PAGE:  
Nancy Sutcliffe, **Only Connect** (detail), 35 x 29 cm, engraved and gilded.



sold in galleries and designer-maker fairs (the phrase “craft fair” had fallen out of favour in the UK).

A chance meeting at one such event led to an invitation to a workshop at the Guild of Glass Engravers, and then on to a course in drill engraving.

This was what Nancy had been waiting for—a way to translate the fine detail of her drawings permanently onto glass.

The sandblaster gathered dust in a corner and was eventually sold. Instead Nancy spent the next ten years drawing and carving with the drill, learning more every day and experimenting with new ideas.

“I was funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain to attend a summer course at Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State. It was taught by one of the great masters, Czech engraver Jiří Harcuba, assisted by April Surgent who at the time was a rising star. My fellow students were from all over the world and my horizons widened.

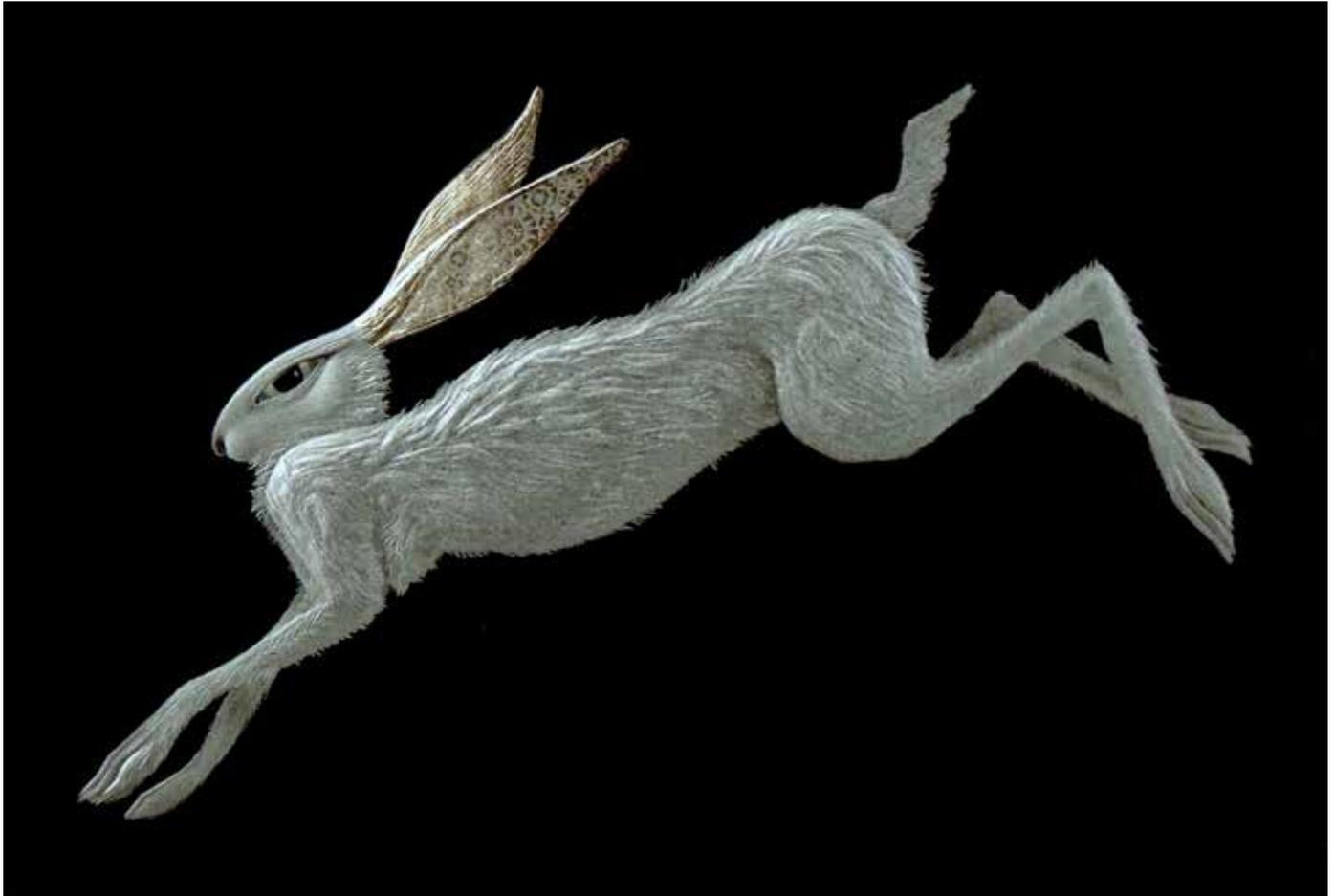
“That experience demonstrated that there are people all over the world who have something very special in common, and I’m very happy to be a small part of that network of support and information exchange across borders and

cultures. Social media has brought the scattered glass family even closer together and I’m an active participant.”

Then came another geographical upheaval that took her to the Middle East, and again the physical conditions prompted a change of direction. “In Abu Dhabi and later in Dubai I had no workshop, just a small working area in our apartments. I had to transfer whatever I made in my hand luggage on the flights back to Europe”—which is where her clients and exhibition opportunities tended to be.

The drill, with its transformer and all its bits and burrs, takes up little more space than a hairdryer and is eminently portable. It was the perfect tool for this new stage of Nancy’s career. The work itself also had to be transportable; Nancy couldn’t take the risk of putting glass through the baggage-handling lottery so it had to travel with her in hand baggage. “Interestingly, crystal blocks show up as solid black objects when they go through security scanners. That’s guaranteed to get the attention of airport security...”

As for the work, that had to change radically too. Her first ‘international’ piece was a panel composed of individually engraved and gilded microscope slides. “I could carry around



a hundred slides in a box the size of my fist,” so she was able to work on them in the UAE and finish the work when she returned to Britain. That involved applying water gilded gold leaf over the engraving and mounting the finished slides in a frame.

This work, ‘Memory Cloud,’ plays on the idea of time and the transient nature of memory. It featured a series of heads engraved on the wafer-thin scientific glass slides; these were then mounted in lines, to be read like a narrative. “The heads are almost entirely concealed by the gold leaf and are only fleetingly visible as the viewer passes by. It felt almost reckless to be covering up such a lot of hard work, but necessary to get the effect I wanted.”

Yet again the practical constraints had changed Nancy’s artistic practice, but this time a more thoughtful, more emotional tone was emerging in her work. “I suppose I began to develop my own voice,” she says.

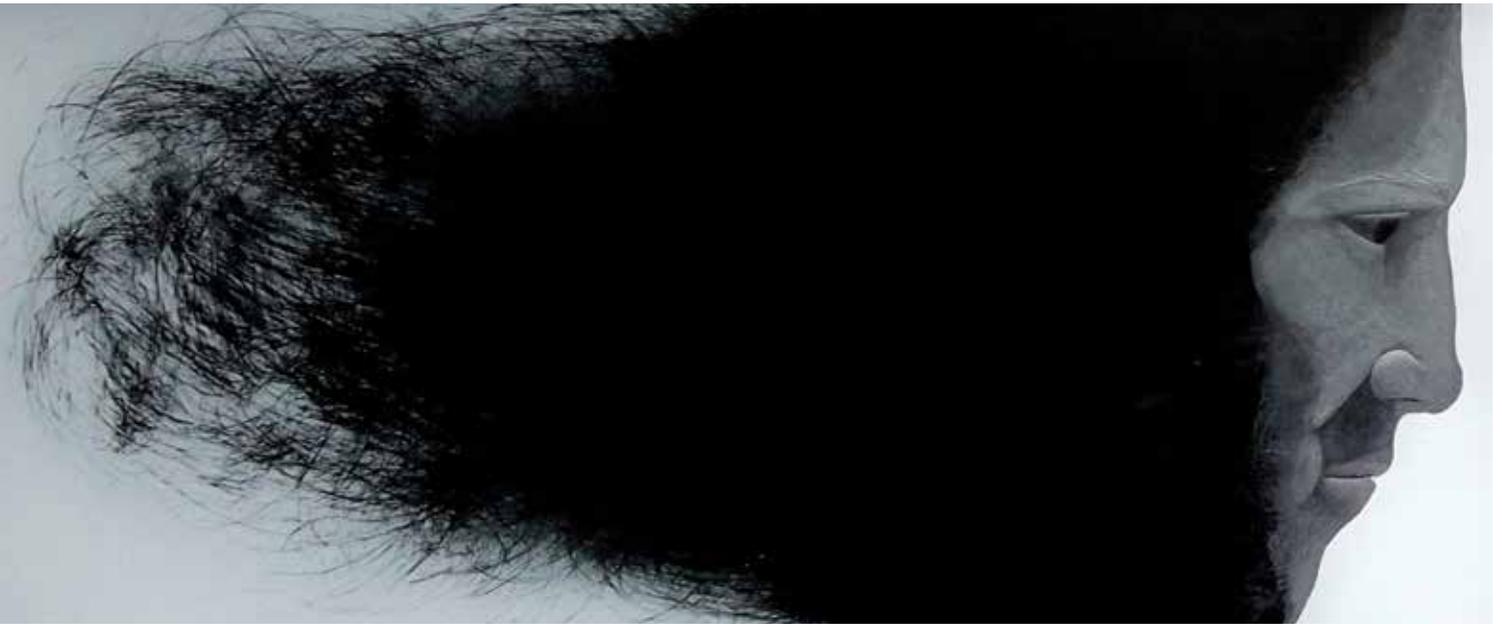
“I am a Fellow of the Guild of Glass Engravers, which emphasises the craft aspects of engraving and I’m proud of the recognition that Fellowship implies. It’s important to recognise that engraving involves very specific techniques, and the Guild promotes a professional approach to method.

“Beyond that, my background in drawing and design has been important in helping me express my imagination.”

There’s still a decorative element to Nancy’s work; you can admire her pieces for the simple pleasure of shapes, shades and colours harmoniously arranged. But there’s usually something additional, a kind of magical realism that plays with the actuality of what you see and hints that something else is going on. Her engraved faces are precisely and accurately constructed, but they aren’t portraits; the ears and eyes may be anatomically correct, but their hair is often pushing the boundaries of feasibility, hinting at thoughts and emotions. Body proportions are frequently elongated to suggest movement whilst still giving a nod to the underlying bone structure. Her insects are instantly recognisable, and have the right kind of legs and carapaces;

FACING PAGE:  
Nancy Sutcliffe at work.

THIS PAGE:  
Nancy Sutcliffe, **Magical Gilded Hare**, engraved and gilded.



they just aren't identifiable—and what beetles have tattooed patterns in the gold leaf on their wings?

Finding the right audience for these beautifully designed and creatively realised pieces is vital. These days the work might be destined for galleries or for buyers, but it's as likely to be on its way to an exhibition. "I apply for a number of juried exhibitions each year. It's always stimulating to respond to a 'call for artists' and to work to someone else's theme. For me, it's a way of developing new ideas, thinking outside my usual parameters.

"It's also good to see how others have responded to the same brief. It's not a question of measuring myself against my peers, more an opportunity to participate in a kind of informal network."

Nancy's first solo show opens in the Eisch Gallery in Frauenau, Germany. This show represents 6 months of concentrated work. The theme of the exhibition 'mirror mirror' is image and reflection. There are pieces where the reflection is literal, with duplicated faces and figures mirroring each other, or works where the reflection is personal, the water gilded mirror finish allowing the viewer to participate in the artwork by seeing themselves in the glass. The "now you see me, now you don't" mirrors have mysterious figures hidden behind the gilding, only visible from certain view points, and 'fabulous beasts' are bright and shiny with reflective wing cases.

It includes more than two dozen pieces of varying sizes and shapes; she says it draws together everything she has learned



ALL PHOTOS, THESE PAGES: NANCY SUTCLIFFE



or developed over the last few years. “As with most of my work, these pieces are representational and figurative but operate in a world of magical realism. The faces are not portraits and the insects are not found in any field guide, but they are not less real.”

One of a group of international centres for glass work, Frauenau has the Bild-Werk International Glass Academy; this year it celebrated engraving with four courses and Nancy was one of the tutors.

Her show at the Eisch Gallery coincides with the finale of Gravur on Tour, a touring exhibition of work by 31 contemporary European engravers that has been to six other cities. Nancy also has several pieces in this show.

So what’s next? “More exhibitions, more galleries hopefully, a bit more teaching maybe—certainly I’ll be returning next year to Bild-Werk to give a course.

“Currently I’m developing a range of mirrored pieces for interiors and that will be one of my main projects in the near future, along with larger scale engraved objects, maybe another dabble with vessels, and of course, more drawing. Always more drawing.” ■



TOP LEFT AND RIGHT:  
Nancy Sutcliffe, **Rorschach Boys**, 60 x 15 cm, painted, engraved, and gilded (pink silver).

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM:  
Nancy Sutcliffe, **Run Two**, 20 x 15 cm, engraved and gilded crystal.

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM:  
Nancy Sutcliffe, **Introvert**, 10 cm cube, engraved and gilded.

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*Dennis Jarrett is (among other things) a writer and publisher. Most of his working life has been spent in journalism; currently he is Editor in Chief—and just about everything else—of magpie, a print/digital project that provides an artistic and cultural what’s-on guide for the United Arab Emirates. For more information, visit [www.magpie.ae](http://www.magpie.ae).*