

Captured on canvas

IAN RAY talks to Claire Phillips, a West Sussex artist who took a life-changing trip to document the stories of people on Death Row through her paintings

Pictures by
Simon Dack

PORTRAITURE, perhaps more than any other form of painting, has an uncanny knack for raising questions. Part autobiography, part snapshot of a single moment, we find ourselves asking who the person staring back at us is ... how did they come to be sitting for the artist? What did they do after they were captured in oils?

Each of the figures who gaze out from Claire Phillips' canvases has a deeply thought-provoking story to tell, stories that are bound up with the 46-year-old artist's own journey across the US to hear them. The Partridge Green artist made a decision five years ago to capture inmates on Death Row – some of whom are widely believed innocent – and the people intimately involved in this grim process, from executioner to juror.

It wasn't a decision the former engineer took lightly. Claire had recently graduated from a part-time degree she'd studied for alongside her role in the management consultancy she runs with husband Mike when she became interested in the work of Reprieve.

The British organisation campaigns for fair trials around the world and offers legal aid for people facing the death penalty without the money for a lawyer. It was a talk from founder and director Clive Stafford Smith that spurred Claire into action.

"They brought Ryan Matthews and his mother over [one of Claire's subjects, Matthews was exonerated from killing a shopkeeper after five years facing execution on Death Row] and it was incredibly moving – it was just a case of wrong place wrong time for him. He'd been 17 when he was convicted and he was kind of shell-shocked. I had teenage children and I knew boys of 17 who could have been caught up in something like that.

"Clive asked everyone to use whatever talents they had to tell these stories and raise awareness. I think he was really thinking about people training as lawyers, but I thought 'I can paint' and that's where it all came from."

She took her idea for a series of portraits to an enthusiastic Stafford Smith and secured a grant for the project from Arts Council England before setting about determining just who she would paint. She wrote to inmates and spent countless hours trawling the internet looking for people she could speak to, and the process soon became a year-long labour of love as she joined waiting lists for access to prisons and began planning the trip.

"Because I was doing this to promote the work of Reprieve, it wasn't about trying to create an objective scientific study. All the people I met had very strong cases for innocence or miscarriage of justice. Now, I'm not naive enough to think everybody on Death Row is innocent, but it was important to me to get people from across the system."

She began seeking appointments with the likes of prison warden Don Cabana and the state legislator who drafted the bill that made Oklahoma the first state to adopt the lethal injection (the series also includes a wonderfully relaxed portrait of Stafford Smith) before she began preparations for the journey itself. Gently spoken and one of those people who seems to wear their kindness in their manner, it's hard to imagine Claire in the cold, grim setting of a prison. Her husband accompanied her on an 11-day trip that took in thousands of miles of the southern US states. "They are very intimidating places. There are these huge coils of razor wire everywhere and huge towers with guards and guns, and there's this constant clanging of the doors."

Once inside and visiting the prisoners, Claire would talk to the inmates about their stories. She says getting to know them was essential to the project, despite the emotional toll.

"Linda Carty is on Death Row in Texas and she's a British subject [Carty was jailed eight years ago for the murder of a neighbour]. She may be executed this year, and because I'd travelled a long way I was able to spend four hours with her. You're behind this bulletproof grille that you have to keep peering under, but she was just the most vivacious, bubbly woman who was asking about Prince William's girlfriend and the cricket.

"She was constantly saying there was no way she'd be executed because she knew she was innocent and they would realise."

Astonishingly, Claire would dash back to the couple's hired car after meeting her subjects and sketch them from memory in the same way a court sketcher does.

"I wasn't allowed to take anything in – I even had to remove my watch at one prison – so I tried to memorise their features and sketched as soon as I could."

In some instances, Claire was privy to the visiting habits of the families of those in Death Row. She spent time with the wife

of another British citizen, Krishna Maharaj (who was the subject of a BBC investigation asserting his innocence of a double murder), and joined her in getting up at four in the morning for her fortnightly visit.

She also visited Don Cabana, the former warden of Mississippi State Penitentiary who supervised the execution of a man he now believes to be innocent. Claire felt Cabana, now warden of a prison without a death row, was racked with guilt, something borne out by his public opposition to the death penalty (and indeed his current role as warden of a prison without a Death Row). Despite the intensity of her experiences, she felt the project wasn't quite complete on her return home.

"When I came back from the trip, something that bothered me was that people were saying 'What about the victims, what about their story?'. I only had people who were accused of murder or were involved with the death penalty in that way. And then I came across this lady, Marietta Jaeger Lane, who had lost her seven-year-old daughter to a murderer."

And so an extra leg was added to Claire's mammoth journey as she took a trip back to the US to meet Jaeger Lane in Montana.

Back home a second time, and armed with sketches and photographs of her subjects, Claire began work on the portraits from her airy home studio.

"I've always been fascinated by human nature and human character, and whatever I tried to paint it never gave me as much satisfaction as portraiture. It always came back to looking at how I could capture somebody or tell their story."

The work has now been exhibited at London's South Bank, at universities and galleries. Crucially, Claire has included each individual's story alongside the canvas, and in many cases audio of them speaking about their case.

It's been a life-changing experience for Claire and her hope is that some of that will rub off on the many people who've been interested in her work.

"I went into it with a theoretical idea about why I didn't agree with the death penalty ... it was more academic. Now, it's become so much more emotional.

"A lot of people in the US realise the system isn't foolproof, but there's a sense that the people who slip through the cracks are the price they have to pay for justice. But if you're the person who has to pay that price..."

■ Visit www.clairephillips.com to see more examples of Claire's work, and to read the story behind each of the portraits



Claire working in her studio



With one of her portraits

