

**Elaine M. Goodwin**  
***Journeying to Light* April - June 2019**  
**A Retrospective Exhibition**  
**Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter, England**

A personal view by Paul Bentley\*



*“My work is about light.”* (Elaine M. Goodwin)

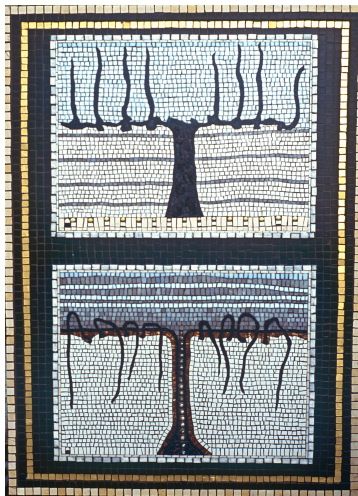
One of the great things about great art is that it opens itself to endless interpretations. In the marvellous mosaics of Elaine M Goodwin we encounter LIFE. Consider this - Albrecht Durer's *Grasses* painting may be technically faultless but it seems dead beside Leonardo da Vinci's *Star of Bethlehem* plant, which is supremely *alive*. For me Elaine's work is on the da Vinci side of the divide.

The exhibition is grouped by theme but for this article I lean towards chronology, using the exhibits to explore aspects of Elaine's development as an artist whose medium happens to be mosaic. Over the years she has essayed mosaics inspired by many subjects: natural Nature, cultivated Nature (the vine), water, the human body, particle physics and others.



*Vase with Three Birds* 1978

The earliest mosaic shown is *Vase with Three Birds* of 1978, the background swarming with swirling *andamento* which contrasts strongly with the horizontal lines of the vase - curves counterpointing straight lines are frequent in Elaine's work. The vase looks like a vase, and birds and leaves and blooms are much as you see in Nature. But in her later variations on the traditional Tree of Life is that the trees are not naturalistic but expressed in elemental forms - Plato would be pleased.



*The Vine: The Vine* 1986



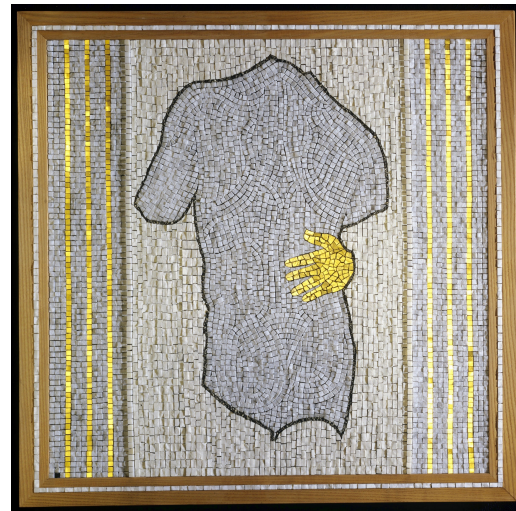
*Vin Divin* 2017

Mosaics of the vine tree are prominent (it's no surprise Elaine has settled in Burgundy) but the evolution from *The Vine* of 1986 - the plant form clear - to the abstract *Vin Divin* of 2017 is remarkable. One thinks of Matisse, whose four relief sculptures *The Back* evolve from the naturalistic body of 1909 to one of 1929 which consists of powerful elemental forms.

I'm not saying Elaine's work is now entirely abstract, but then artists can be (should be?) unpredictable - the move from near-naturalism to abstraction in Elaine's mosaics isn't always chronological. Take the human form, one of her principal interests. The abstract *HE* of 2004 preceded the figurative *Ecce Homo* torso of 2005. Still it seems clear that Elaine is driven increasingly to depict the body in abstract shapes, as seen in the recent *He/She* diptych.



*He* 2004



*Ecce Homo* 2005

Which also raises the role of symmetry in Elaine's work. When depicting the human body symmetry is natural - our bodies are symmetrical, at least on the outside. And symmetry is in itself beautiful, as is superbly demonstrated by *He/She*. Further, Elaine is clearly attracted to diptychs - there are five in this exhibition alone, the first dated 2005, and the last *He/She* 2019. Pairs are of course fundamental in our universe: male/female, light/dark, day/night, life/death, body/soul. But Elaine as an artist explores not merely pattern in our world, but also the fundamentals in Life, and above all spiritual depth.

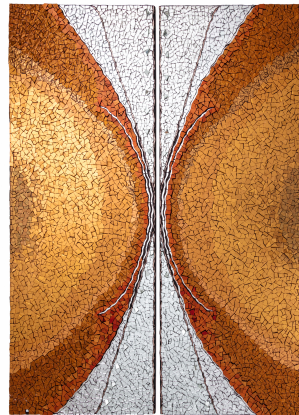


*He/She* (diptych) 2019



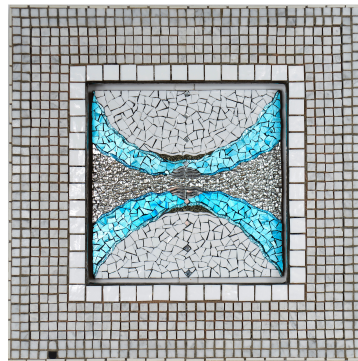
To be sure, there is another elemental pattern in the world: *the rule of three*; 3 dimensions; 3 primary colours; past/present/future; So it is perhaps inevitable that five triptychs are exhibited, the earliest dated 2005 and the latest 2017. There is even a quadriptych - *Impotentia* (2018).

However, lest you be tempted to think all is rectangular in our artist's later development, let me adduce the spectacularly curvaceous *Light Coitus* diptych of 2013, one of ten mosaics in which pronounced curves are a structural element of the work.



*Light Coitus* (diptych) 2013

While discussing elements I have to mention water, so important to Elaine, and without which, astronomers tell us, a planet has no *life*. Muted blues, greys and silvers predominate in the earlier mosaics *Without II* 2001.



*Without II* of 2001

Many of the mosaics illustrate Elaine's increasing use of *opus palladianum* ("crazy paving" patterning). It has the supreme advantage that although the enclosing forms may be rectangular yet palladianum gives them movement and *life*. Note also in *Vin Divin* the use of serpentine slivers of mirrored glass - an example of remarkable cutting skill. Over the years Elaine has increased the range of materials she employs: besides the usual smalti, vitreous and ceramic tesserae we see granite, white Carrara marble, silver and Venetian gold, the mirror slivers, and even "fool's gold" (iron pyrite). For example *Luccichii di Venezia: Amando* (1992) is made of smalti, gold, vitreous, fool's gold and granite.





*Luccichii di Venezia: Amando* 1992

Again, Elaine's mosaics often have a fascinating three-dimensional quality: perhaps from the rough surface of stone or from the angling of the tesserae. In recent years Elaine has used not merely "islands" of raised tesserae, but triangular ridges running the length of the mosaic, as in *Beyond Being* and *Outre Lumière* (2018) and *He/She* (2019).

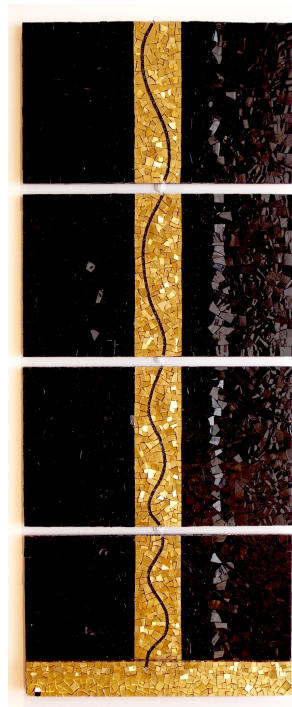


*Beyond Being* 2018

To grout or not? Sometimes you have to, for a floor or a mural mosaic. But Elaine has come to prefer her mosaics ungrouted, which is my preference also, and for reasons good. Mosaics consist precisely of *individual pieces*, and each single tessera has its own *quiddity*, "thisness", even though the tesserae together make a whole.

In the beginning I quoted Elaine as saying, “My work is about light”, and I will conclude with what I regard as her Damascene conversion where mosaic is concerned. In the late eighties she visited the Byzantine church of San Vitale in Ravenna where she experienced a sunbeam dissolve the mosaic images into pure light, and henceforth light became the leading motif of her work. Gold is at the heart of the matter and famously, Byzantine mosaic artists, regarded gold as the supreme symbol of Divine Light.

Yet, in her recent mosaics, Elaine has juxtaposed gold areas and very dark ones - blue or black, to wonderful, engrossing, deeply spiritual effect. The black and gold *Impotentia*, the mosaic Elaine chose as the emblem of *Journeying to Light*, thus powerfully embodies the goal she has sought in her art for forty years.



*Impotentia (quadriptych) 2018*

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A superb Catalogue accompanies the exhibition Price 14 € / £12,50  
[www.elainemgoodwin.co.uk](http://www.elainemgoodwin.co.uk)