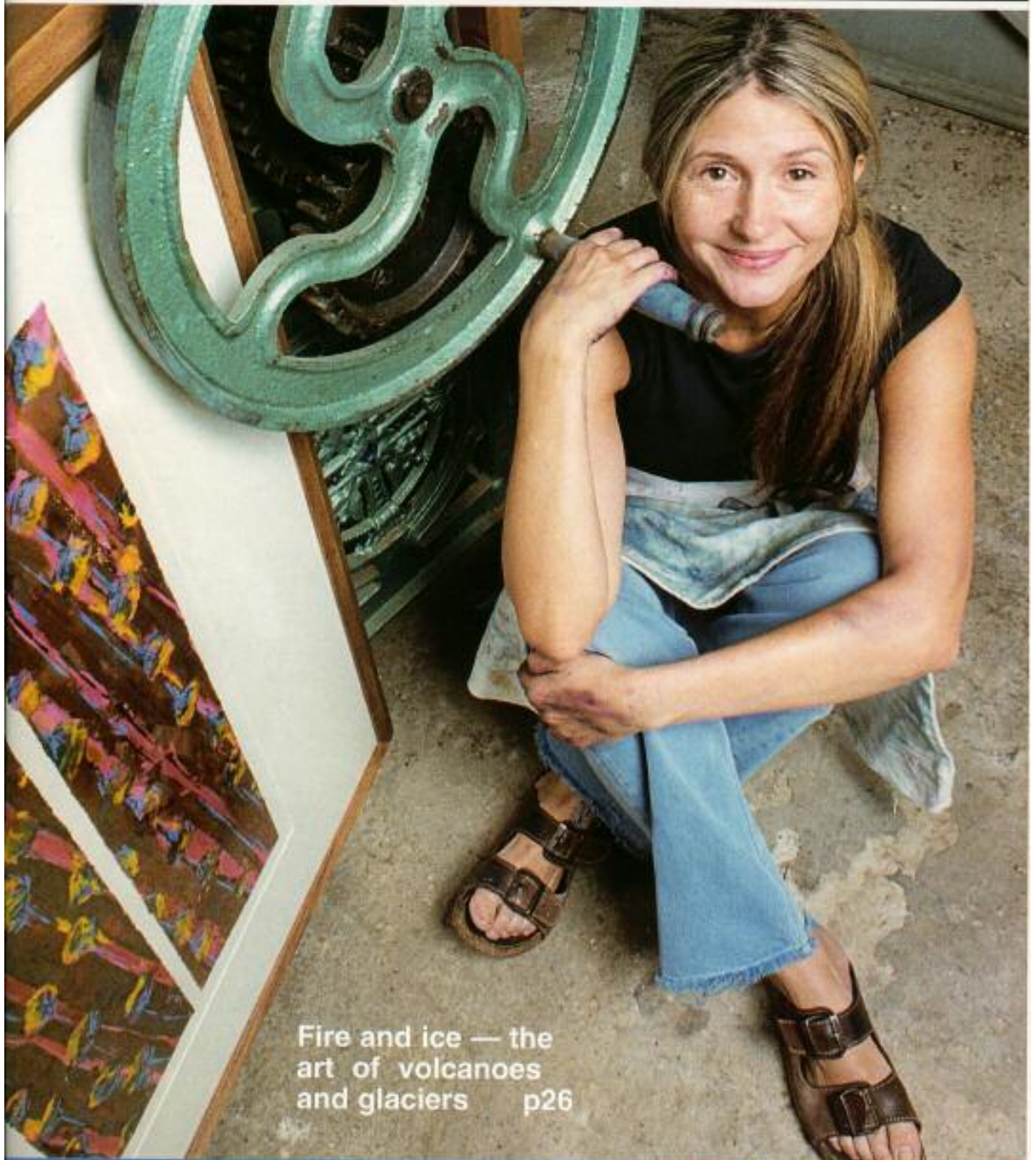


Limited Edition

£1.25

October 2002

The magazine for Oxfordshire



Fire and ice — the
art of volcanoes
and glaciers p26

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Fire & ice



Lucy Tennyson meets Allyson Austin, a printmaker who is inspired by the forces of nature

Think of printmaking and you might imagine something carefully crafted, and painstakingly etched out in metal, or an image reproduced over and over again.

Meet Allyson Austin and you will find an artist who delights in bucking the trend. Her prints are big and bold, up to 12 feet square in size, and definitely not to be tucked away in a corner.

Her subject matter, too, tends to be huge, and not for the faint-hearted. Volcanoes erupting, pouring out liquid red and gold. Or glaciers, icy blue, carving out massive marks in the landscape.

She produces monoprints, each is a one-off, created on a metal surface, which is then run through the printing press just once to create a unique image on paper.

Allyson herself comes as quite a surprise after seeing the power and energy of her work. She is slim and petite, and certainly doesn't look as if she spends her time trying to recreate some of the earth's most dramatic moments.

She works in a quiet and leafy studio overlooking the back garden of her home in Headington. It's a tranquil spot, and everything inside is neat and orderly, with trial prints stacked up on the table and against the walls.

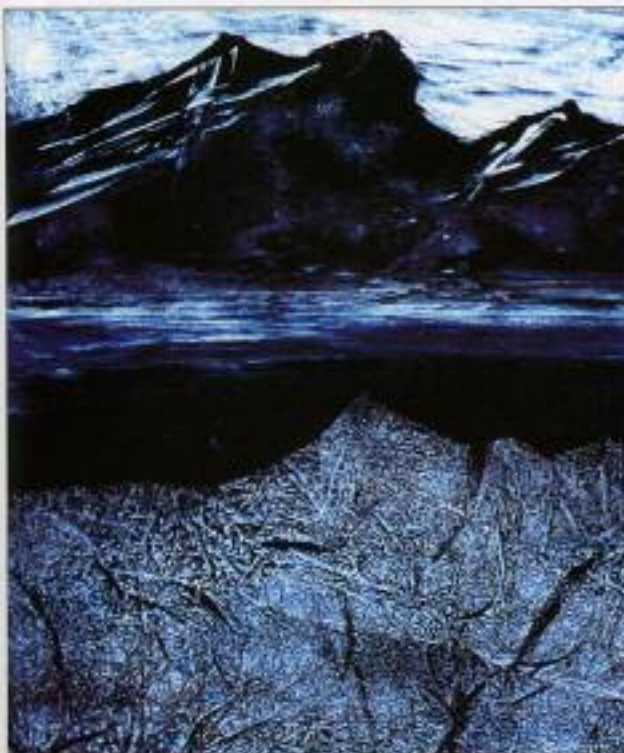
She assures me she works "in a total mess" covering both herself and her surroundings in the vivid reds and blues of printing inks. She shows me the printing press out in the garage, which she has recently reassembled after taking it out to Italy to record its volcanoes. "It's falling apart but I've been too busy to mend it."

Allyson continues to defy any attempt at categorisation. When she's not making prints, she doesn't seek relaxation or an easy day job, but works in the control room at Thames Valley Police, answering 999 calls. She works four days on, four days off, in 12-hour shifts, sometimes through the night.

"I wanted to do something completely different," she explains. "There's a bit of an edge to it. People ring up in a blind panic, and I think I like to be bossy, and take control of the situation. I couldn't do printmaking all the time, so the two jobs complement each other nicely."

Allyson, who was born in St Helens,

■ Top, *Blinded by Glimpses*. Above *Glacia-Phonic* — "Glaciers fascinate me; they are cold and still, but still alive. They have incredible energy when they move," Allyson explains



■ Top, *Split Seconds of Etna*. Left, *Iceberg Echo*. Above, artist Allyson Austin

near Liverpool in 1968, and studied fine art at Leicester Polytechnic, began her career by going into teaching. She left Newbury College in 1997 to set up her own studio in Oxford. "After six years' teaching I had my own ideas which I wanted to explore," Allyson said.

Her fascination with volcanoes had arisen out of visits to Italy. She was captivated by the outline of Vesuvius, captured on a (now tatty) postcard she carries around for inspiration. That outline can be glimpsed in many of her prints, although none of her work is representational.

"I have always been interested in the earth and natural shapes such as mountains. For me, they turn into something personal. A volcano might be dormant, but it is so powerful and so silent. This ties in with a lot of my own ideas, and becomes a metaphor for people or situations," she explained.

"When I see a volcano I make a quick

sketch and take notes. What I find fascinating is the heat and the power, and this is what I try and get over in my work. I like the physical aspect of printmaking. My prints are big because I am trying to get over some of the energy.

"This ties in with the kind of printmaker I want to be. I am a messy printmaker. I spread the ink everywhere, and use anything I can find, such as the palms of my hand, bits of card or wood to make marks."

Allyson's prints of volcanoes and glaciers capture some of that immense energy stored up in mountains and ice. The colours are breathtaking and luminous, created by using drawing inks over the top of traditional oil-based etching inks.

Her work continues to develop as she explores the natural world. She recently visited Iceland, drawn by its unique frozen landscape that is still volcanic. "Iceland was unbelievable, so incredibly strange.

I couldn't believe how beautiful it was.

"Glaciers fascinate me, they are cold and still, but still alive. They have incredible energy when they move. A glacial lake is clear and unbelievably still. Scientists have discovered lakes underneath the ice, too. These are hidden, a bit like the way things are hidden inside a person."

Strangely enough, Allyson's work might have remained hidden away, too, but for gallery owner Sarah Wiseman.

After leaving teaching, she had worked part-time for two years in her Summertown gallery, but only showed Sarah her prints just before leaving.

"Sarah had been asking me for ages. Luckily, she really liked them, and I held my first exhibition in Artweeks, 1999."

That exhibition was a sell-out and Allyson's work has been on show there ever since.

■ *Anyone wishing to find out more about Allyson Austin should contact Sarah Wiseman on 01865 515123*