From canvas to curator

Is this the perfect life? **Kate Copstick** goes to Venice to meet Holly Snapp and her artist husband Geoffrey Humphries.

"Sorry," says Holly Snapp, her perfectly manicured hands wiggling energetically with concern, "I just have the perfect life!" Truth be told, she does. Holly lives in Venice, having moved there 16 years ago from Seattle, via Wellesley College, Boston, and New College, Oxford. She is married to Geoffrey Humphries, an English-born painter of much renown. They live on the Giudecca, in Geoffrey's vast studio – the Giudecca Canal itself is their front lawn. She has three thriving contemporary art galleries, teaches part-time at the Ca' Foscari and relaxes in what is less a social circle and more a social charm bracelet. The Snapp-Humphries union has given Venice a child, Lucy Mae, and, currently, Holly is hopelessly besotted with the latest addition to her family: Milo, son of her adored Venetian barge dog Perdie.

"He's obviously homosexual," she remarks, as Milo lies beneath a naked twenty-something in the Calle della Botteghe (Holly's second gallery has a permanent exhibition of Geoffrey's portraiture), his artful pose somehow invoking Jude Law in *The Talented Mr Ripley* on the beach at Positano. "I have never seen such an obviously gay dog. But his little sister has the hots for him, and his older sister is definitely very butch." Suddenly, in *gallerista* mode, she breaks away to greet a customer, one of those Venetian ladies who are as wide as they are high – at least in full January fur. *"Cognosce l'artista?"* she beams, pointing her furs at Milo and the naked twenty-something.

"Perhaps we could invent some problems for me. I mean, I don't want to come across as smug!" she says later, tipping Dietor into a tiny cup of *macchiatto* in a café on Campo Santo Stefano. "You know… my battle against… um, something!" She shrugs, wide-eyed, applies a topcoat of her trademark dark plum Chanel to lips that don't seem to stop enthusing about life, even as she colours, and then we are back to the gallery to meet Hughes le Gallais, a Venetian whom Holly introduces as "Young and gorgeous. He rents out rooms in his family's palazzo on the Grand Canal. It is fabulous; you should see it!" And indeed I do, as Huges has just bought a vast and really rather fabulous painting by Wulf Winkelman, one of Holly's current artists.

Holly and her faun-like assistant, Laura, take the painting from the wall and simply carry it through the alleyways of San Marco to Hughes' family *palazzo*. By the time we reach it, Holly has done such a phenomenal PR job on the properties that Hughes rents out with his partner, Orsola Foscari Widmann Rezzonico, that I get the name of his website before we leave. Then we're trotting off across the Accademia Bridge to meet her family and friends at the tiny enoteca in San Trovaso, which is her second home in Venice.

Holly Snapp's original home and family are in Seattle; her father is a gentle, charming man whose natural inclinations were altruistic but

Photography © Ed Baumeister Jr

We're trotting off across the Accademia Bridge to meet her family and friends at the tiny enoteca in San Trovaso, which is her second home in Venice.

Her youngest dog, Milo, is, according to Holly, "obviously gay".

It's not all heavy lifting, mind.

"I knew what I wanted to be aged five," she announces. "European."

who, after finding that a career in social work helped everybody but him, made a strategic and lucrative retreat to the family firm of insurers.

"My brother did the same sort of thing," says Holly. "I'm the only one who has escaped. I knew what I wanted to be aged five," she announces, eyebrows disappearing under her blonde fringe. "European."

FRENCH AND ENGLISH

Her mother, a successful commercial artist, fed the young Holly French and English literature, but it was always Italy that fascinated her. Her gap year (once you know Holly, it doesn't surprise you that she actually took a gap year-and-a-half) was spent in Rome, Florence and Paris, and it was really Rome that was her first great Italian love.

But after getting BAs in English and Italian at Wellesley and Oxford, the young Ms Snapp started a DPhil on a 17th Century Ferenese poet by the name of Giambattista Guarini, got a scholarship to complete her studies at the Ca' Foscari – the University of Venice – and never went home. "I got a job as a lecturer at the University teaching English. Back then in Venice we had no health insurance, we were paid pennies and we had no security of tenure," says Holly, warming to a theme. "You held your job on a year-by-year basis. I kept thinking I'd go home at the end of each year. But I didn't."

She is still teaching at the University, but two landmark court cases down the line, Holly and seven fellow *lettori*, have their security of tenure and a clutch of other parities with the Associate Professors, whose work they were more or less doing anyway. As of April 2004, the University has agreed to equal pay for equal work – and to make that agreement retrospective.

"But they still don't recognise my degree, and I don't teach literature or oversee theses any more. I really just teach grammar. But that's OK."

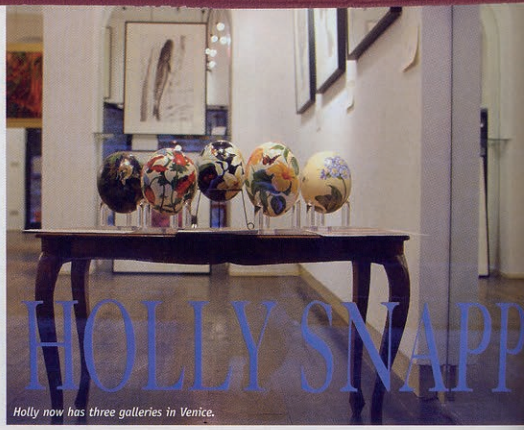
We reach the Schiavi, a tiny *enoteca* of the kind that wraps

I thought: "This is a wonderful man: a great cook, an incredible painter, an amazing musician... What are you doing? So I seduced him in the car. An Audi."

➤ you up in all that you love about Italy the moment you walk through the door. There is a constant coming and going of friends, neighbours and colleagues – Italian and ex-pats.

"The people who come to Venice are a sort of wonderful self-selecting group," says Holly, as the charming *padrone*, Lino, pours us cabernet from a bottle the size of a two-year-old. "They are either incurable romantics, have something very wrong with them or are just plain odd."

While I work out which I am, Holly goes into PR mode and does the introductions. She insists I try the *baccala*, and reveals that it was the problems with university life that led to her first gallery: "The money was terrible, I was split between two departments and overworked." So she did as Geoffrey advised and "got another string to her bow". She opened an art gallery. And having Geoffrey Humphries as your live-in star client wasn't exactly a drawback.



Holly now has three galleries in Venice.

HUGH HEFNER OF VENICE

"I met Geoffrey at one of his openings. He terrified me. He sort of grunts at you. I liked him. I thought he was fascinating, but alarming. And he always had trails of gorgeous models following him everywhere. He was the Hugh Hefner of Venice."

Eventually, she posed for Geoffrey – "for a drawing for my parents. He knew every town in the Veneto, and everywhere we went he got a hero's welcome. And I thought: 'This is a wonderful man: a great cook, an incredible painter, an amazing musician... What are you doing?" She cocks her head a little to one side and smiles. "So I seduced him in the car. An Audi."

When the first Gallery Holly Snapp opened in the Calle delle Botteghe in 1996, it sold a dozen of Geoffrey's watercolours on the first day. "You know you can start a company in two hours in England?" she comments, "Twelve months I spent jumping through red tape here. I had to have my degree translated and signed by a Notary Public, I had to pass exams at the Chamber of Commerce in things like book-keeping, I had to have proof that I don't have a police record..." She throws her head back and laughs. "I took Dickens along, and *Vanity Fair*, and I sat in queues and queues and queues. But I did it."

The opening of the second gallery, which now permanently shows Geoffrey's work, was made difficult by a fairly common Venetian complication of discovering that the small derelict pasta factory that she wanted to rent was owned by no less than six separate people – and that Italian law necessitates a contract with one single owner. Italian red tape has infuriated this energetic woman for most of her 16 years here. "But it can actually be wonderful, too," she muses. "I mean, things take forever to happen here, but that means that I sometimes get six, even nine months' credit!"

Now three Gallery Holly Snapps stud the Calle delle Botteghe, with an international selection of contemporary art. The galleries boast an international client base which has included Mario Testino and Sam Mendes, and are one of the must-see features of the *Biennale* when "I let my hair down with hot young British artists," she grins.

We decide to have one for the road and enquire as to the immediate

Holly left Seattle 16 years ago – and has never looked back.

Relaxing at home with Lucy Mae and the dogs.

desires of the liveliest result of the Humphries-Snapp collaboration. Lucy Mae was "a surprise", says her mum, gazing fondly as the five-year-old charms the entire bar. "I didn't read the books. I didn't want to know about breathing or exercises. I knew I was having an epidural. I can't cope with pain." Friends arranged a private clinic near Verona, and the epidural was agreed – not as simple as it sounds. "They hate giving epidurals here." says mum. "Italian medics see the child as their client, not you, and they don't think epidurals are good for the child."

Holly gave up wine at the start of her pregnancy, but began to suffer headaches. "Eventually I went to our wonderful GP and he said 'drink two glasses of *vino rosso* and eat a piece of good *parmiggiano* every night and you will be fine'. And I was! Don't you absolutely love this country?"

But it wasn't all nibbling *parmesan* and lying back to think of Italy: five days before the birth was due, she got a phonecall to say they'd closed the clinic. So, after scouring the Veneto for somewhere else with a bed and anaesthetics, Holly ended up in Mestre.

"There was a woman in the next room, obviously in agony. She was making these animal noises. I asked the doctor why she didn't just have an epidural and he said 'But she has!'. Then I remembered why I hadn't wanted to have my epidural here. They don't do them very well."

LUCY MAE

Lucy Mae is now five, speaks English in the cutest of American accents and Italian in the richest of Italian. She attends a private school near the Accademia. "We pay pennies," says Holly. Private schools in Venice are not quite the socially aspirational places they are in the UK, widely regarded as harbours for children with more money than brains or, most damningly, outposts of the Catholic Church. "Many Venetians really hate the church, they are almost anti-religious. Venetians just don't like to admit that anyone is more powerful than they are."

Arianna, Lucy's best friend, goes to state school and is thriving, but her school doesn't use books, and there is a terrifying dependence on the internet as a resource.

So, what things frustrate Holly Snapp about life in Venice? "I hate the banks," she nods. "It takes forever just to put a cheque into your own account. But our bank downstairs is sweet. And I hate the Post Office. But not really." She brightens. "Oh, I hate the way the Venetians love to be negative. They sort of suck in air through their teeth and shake their heads and tell you it can't be done. Like when they told me the second gallery could never be made safe from *aqua alta* – and it's beautiful now. Perfect. But I think it's that they don't want to lose face if they say they can do something and fail. So..."

Anything she misses: "Earl Grey tea?" she offers... But thast's as far as it gets. The truth is, Holly Snapp really does have the perfect life. !