

Two's company

Anna Hunter and Laura Walford make up the mother-daughter team that is the Belgravia Gallery. Sebastian Cresswell-Turner meets the duo at their Albermarle space

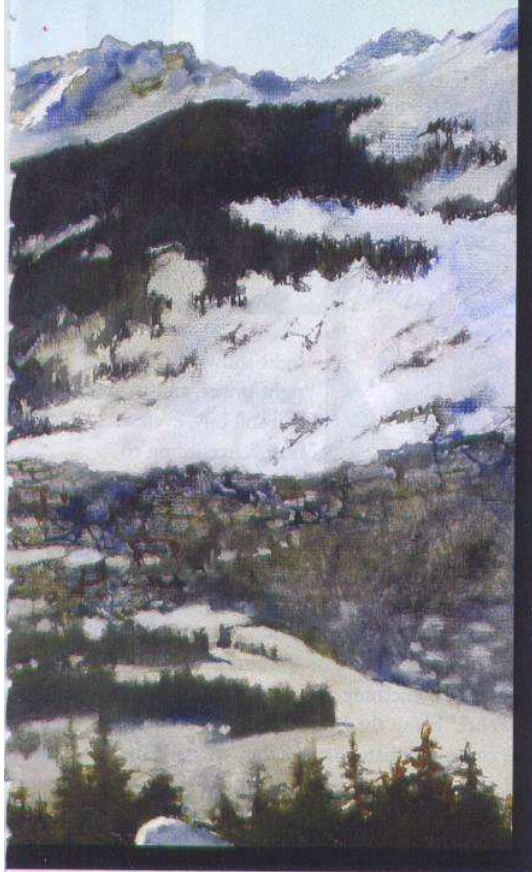


At the south end of Albermarle Street, an iconic 1950s building opposite Max Mara's London headquarters is home to Viscount Linley's furniture shop and also to the Belgravia Gallery, where I have come to meet Mayfair's most high-profile mother-and-daughter team. The 30-year-old Laura Walford – grey eyes, auburn hair, and smart black patent leather Louboutins with red soles – occupies the front of the showroom, and she leads me passed a glass case containing a small Picasso sketch on sale for £24,000 to her mother Anna Hunter, who is seated round the corner at her desk in front of a large Mac screen and a Bottega Veneta handbag at her feet.

Anna is due to fly the following day to India, where she has various charity projects on the go, and is busy reserving her seat on the plane. "I'm fine so long as I sit by the window," she says.

Tomorrow's plans secured, Anna Hunter launches into happy reminiscences of her time at Bristol, where she read Economics and Politics. "I wasn't there to get a top degree," she says with unreconstructed candour, "but to have an amazing time and to meet people, and I achieved my aim. I encouraged my daughter to go there because it has nice restaurants and good hairdressers and lovely architecture. Instead she went to Birmingham, to be with her beloved."

Then immediately another story. The building we are in was designed in 1956 by Hungarian architect Ernő Goldfinger, whose creations Ian Fleming famously disapproved of. "So to get his revenge he named one of his arch-villains after him," continues Anna, referring to Auric Goldfinger, the baddie who cheats at cards and golf and smuggles gold by disguising it as the bodywork of his Rolls Royce.

Rhone Valley from Verbier by
Victor Egorov

To listen to this impeccably turned out 'gallerista', as the fifty-something Anna Hunter jokingly calls herself, you might think that her life was one long party. But as her daughter Laura assures me, she started out with nothing and has got where she is by hard work and good judgement. So I am here to get the inside story.

Having completed her education at a convent in Surrey and then at Bristol, Anna Hunter moved to north London, where she married young, had three children in rapid succession, and divorced equally swiftly.

"It was unbelievably messy," she confesses. "He left me with three small children to educate privately and a large house to run." To make ends meet, she taught A-Level Economics at a private school nearby. "I enjoyed it, and I loved the long holidays, but it was very repetitive and poorly paid," she says. "Every May I taught the balance of payments and every



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autumn it was micro-economics." The future stretched ahead with no challenge or variety on the horizon. Five years of this were enough.

Finally, in 1986, she was encouraged by the culture of Mrs Thatcher's Britain to start her own company. "I always had a business streak," she continues. "Even at university I spent my whole grant on art the minute it came in, and then ate baked beans and nettle soup all term." She now sold the works she had accumulated in student days and with the proceeds set up Anna Hunter Fine Art, publishing hand-made signed lithographs by well known Royal Academicians such as Ruskin Spear and Norman Hepple.

As often happens in the early days of any business, there was comedy; and as an April fool's joke at an art fair in Olympia, she once exhibited an installation made out of 196 rolls of Andrex loo-paper. The artist, she announced, was a certain Sir F. Patril, who, distantly related to the Queen, emerged from his lair in the Himalayas once a year to create a work – in this case representing the symbiotic relationship between man and his environment. Nobody realised that the fictional name was an anagram of 1st April; nobody called her bluff about symbiosis or anything else; and later, to Anna's great amusement, a Mayfair gallery exhibited a loo-roll installation with a huge price tag.

Then, in 1989, she had a major break. Picking up the same Osmaroid pen that she had

used at her convent, where the nuns had taught the girls italic script, she wrote a letter to the Prince of Wales in her trademark brown ink, offering to publish small editions of lithographs based on his watercolours.

Her children were puzzled. "Why do you write with Marmite, Mummy?" they asked. But the Prince liked the idea. "I went to see him in his apartment at St James' Palace," says Anna, "then there were numerous visits to see him at Highgrove and Sandringham to work on the lithographs." These were printed by the renowned Cambridge-based Stanley Jones, who had worked with artists such as Henry Moore, David Hockney and Elizabeth Frink, and over the next decade or so they made images of 18 watercolours, with each individual lithograph signed by the Prince.

"The Prince's art is immensely popular, and we have sold it all over the world," says Hunter. "Also, through the sale of these lithographs, the gallery has so far raised over £4m for the Prince of Wales' Charitable Foundation." Not surprisingly, the most sought-after images are ones of Windsor Castle, Sandringham, Balmoral and Highgrove; and even though prices range from a by no means paltry £4,000 to a pretty hefty £14,000, they have almost sold out.

In 1999, having always operated from home, she opened a showroom in Ebury Street in Belgravia – thus the name of the gallery. ➔

Then in 2001, quite suddenly, when all looked sunny, her younger son Sebastian died tragically at the age of 18. The family was shattered, and although the recently-graduated Laura already had a job lined up in film production, she now joined forces with her mother.

"I stepped in and said let's see how it goes," she says. "And we decided we wouldn't talk about personal things at work." Before she knew what, she was deeply involved and loving every minute of it. Clearly, the pair have nothing but admiration for each other. "It could have worked out so badly," says Anna, "but it's utterly fabulous. She's so clever and so wise and very good with people, with really good business sense and a fantastic eye for art."

The early death of the talented Sebastian also led to the foundation of the Sebastian Hunter

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Memorial Trust (sebsschool.org), which funds schooling in a community in south India made up of the caste that used to be known as the Untouchables. "Sebastian loved India," says Anna, "and was immensely compassionate with

children he saw there whose lives were so devoid of hope. We give regularly as a matter of belief, and we know all the recipients, so the funds are well spent."

About five years ago, having made a splash in an exhibition in 2002 with works by none other than Nelson Mandela, they moved to their current premises in Albemarle Street, at the heart of London's fine art community. Here, with 2,000sq ft at their disposal, they mount up to a dozen exhibitions a year, showing mainly contemporary work that is often bold and striking – Trish Wylie, for example, whose large cowboy canvases, inspired by memorable scenes in 20th-century cinema (*Once Upon A Time In The West*, or *The Magnificent Seven*) and priced between £5,000 and £29,000, are a cross between the abstract and the representational.

But what about the recession? What sells, what's hot?

"In September 2008, after Lehman went bust, we had a show that sold out," says Laura. "Then the feel-good Friday just disappeared; but put on the

right show with the right prices, and people will still buy, even now." According to Anna Hunter, this is an interesting moment. "A number of our clients are using this time to acquire art in the hope that its value

will appreciate," she says. "But if it doesn't, they have something nice to look at."

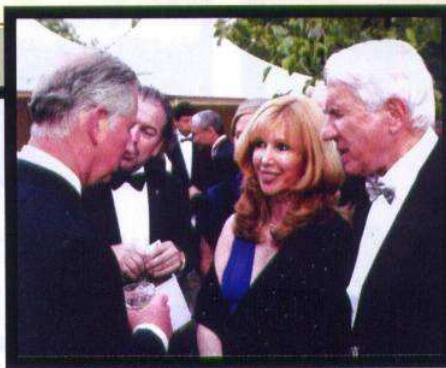
"Nice" being the operative word, because in the current climate, images that are dark and sad do not sell. And Hunter should know. "She has an unerring eye for good art," says Tania Illingworth, an art consultant; "and most importantly for any gallery in WI, for art that is commercially successful."

In their downtime the 'gallerinas' contrive to have a good time. Weekends are spent at Anna's Lutyens house near Guildford, bought in 1999, where her new vineyard should be producing English bubbly within a few years. Then, over Christmas and New Year, they all decamp to the family chalet in Verbier, where they ski religiously and spend the evenings in a scruffy pizzeria called 'Le Fer à Cheval', known to Brits as 'The Furry Shovel'.

And an end-of-year break on the slopes and in this hilariously nicknamed eatery is well-earned; because however glamorous their lives might seem from the outside, there is indeed little that this feisty female duo doesn't know about hard work. ■

The Belgravia Gallery's winter exhibition is showing until 31 January.
45 Albemarle Street, W1, 020 7495 1010
belgraviagallery.com

Highgrove House by HRH The Prince of Wales. Copyright AG Carrick.



Anna Hunter with HRH The Prince of Wales

Hand of Africa by Nelson Mandela



M. Mandela

Mandela