

INKUBATOR

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**ELENA
HOULIHAN**

Artist | Author | Global
Storyteller | Photographer

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THAT MOVE
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TALES OF AN UNREALISTIC LIFE:

The Journey of Elena Hiatt Houlihan

By **She Rises Studios Editorial Team**

Elena Hiatt Houlihan did not wake up one morning and decided to be a rebel. There was no cinematic moment where she walked out on a corporate job or burned a bridge in a fit of artistic passion. Instead, her unrealistic life evolved step by step. It was born from a quiet and persistent realization that the world's definition of "sensible" felt like a suit of armor that was three sizes too small.

Raised in an era where a teaching degree was the gold standard for a respectable woman, Elena followed the familial path. She moved through the motions of academia and eventually earned a master's degree in literature. But while her peers found comfort in the predictable rhythm of a classroom and a steady paycheck, Elena found her pulse quickening in the quiet hours after a project was finished. Whether it was the intricate tension and colors of a weaving or the layered mystery of a collage, the elation was visceral. It was not about external praise, but the deep reward of seeing her vision take physical form in the world.

Encouraging Opportunities

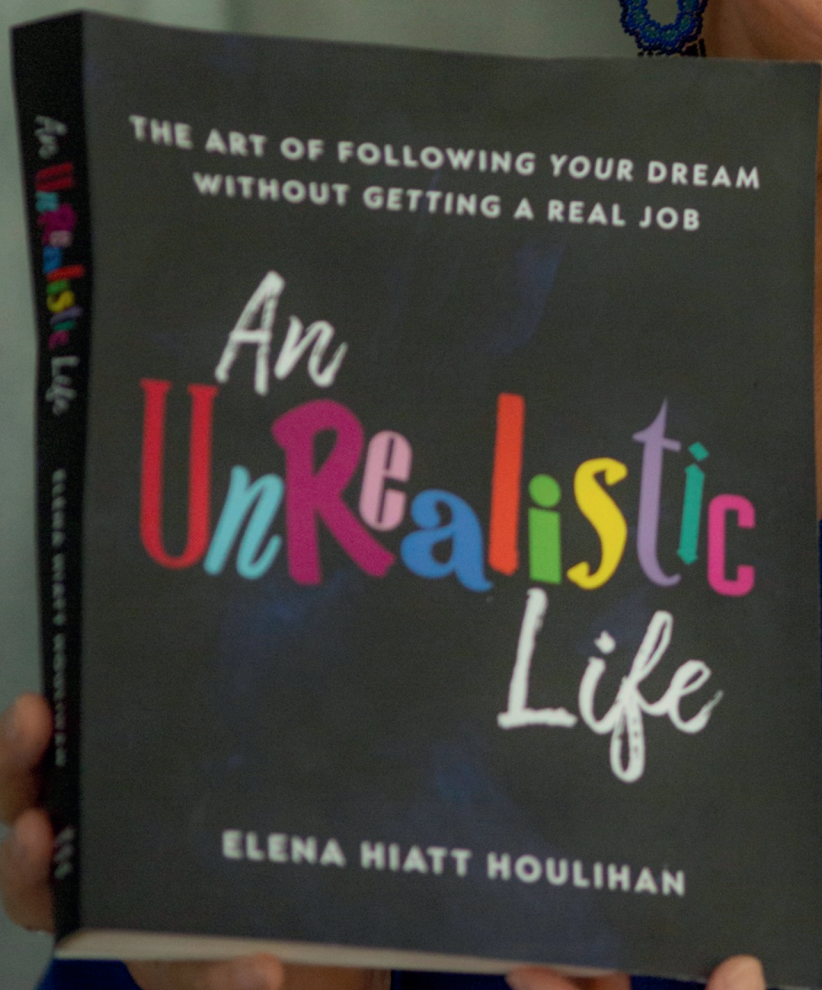
As the sensible path receded, she retreated to her studio. She began to experiment with the raw and the refined by mixing the delicate textures of weaving with the rough shapes of clay. She discovered that if she followed her curiosity instead of the "shoulds," the work began to sustain itself. People did not just examine her art; they purchased it. Her word was accepted into prestigious juried exhibitions. Presentations to architects and developers led to large-scale commissioned art works in office buildings and shopping malls. This was no longer just a hobby. It was an autonomy that no traditional 9-to-5 could ever offer.

External economic fluctuations, however, affected the art world, and this prompted her family to occasionally question her choices and ask, "When are you going to return to teaching or get a real job?" For as long as possible, she ignored them.

From Metal Shops to Balinese Pyres

Elena's creativity was never destined to stay contained within the four walls of a studio. Her hunger for experience propelled her toward the distant countries of the globe. She travelled not as a tourist, but as a witness.

In Bali, she stood amidst the heat and smoke of a Hindu cremation.



She photographed a ritual that was less about performance and more about the bone-deep preservation of identity. In Mexico, she watched Aztec dancers move with a precision that had survived centuries of colonization. These were not vacations. They were encounters with the emotional fabric of humanity.

But travel also brought the sharp sting of economic disparity. She encountered a taxi driver in Johannesburg who spoke multiple languages and possessed a world-weary wisdom. He worked grueling hours for a pittance. These moments grounded her, increasing her empathy and her dedication to portray the lives of others as accurately as possible in her writing.

At home, her life bridged the worlds between the halls of academia and the gritty workshops of union laborers. Despite her advanced degrees, she stood in awe of a craftsman in a metal shop who could run a sheet of aluminum through a massive roller and have it come out exactly as she envisioned it for an aerial sculpture. All art, whether with words or metal, clay or paint on canvas, is a process of conveying meaning with material, an intentional communication with the viewer.

The Birth of the Muse

As her experiences grew, so did the need to document them. In a publishing world that often demands a niche or a platform, Elena built her own. Her newsletter, *The Wandering Muse: Reflections on an Unrealistic Life*, began as a digital campfire, a method of sharing the vignettes of her travels and the philosophy of her art.

What started as a way to connect with a small audience soon evolved into a substantial body of work. The newsletter developed parallel to her work on the book, *An Unrealistic Life: The Art of Following Your Dream Without Getting a Real Job*. As she profiled others living outside the lines, people like photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, an editor, advised her to include her own story. With the addition of art and photography, the book became a hybrid: a collection of unconventional lives that mirrored her own unrealistic journey.

The Cost of the Path

Elena is refreshingly unsentimental about the cost of her choices. She does not hide the unrealistic part behind a veil of romanticism. There were years of thin bank accounts and mounting bills. There was the heavy and well-meaning pressure from family members who begged her to find stability, especially in the fearful atmosphere following 9/11.

She tried to follow that advice. She submitted resumes and looked for real jobs. But the universe seemed to have other plans. When the traditional world rejected her, the creative world opened a window. An invitation to be an artist-in-residence at the Community Day school in Pittsburgh led to her organizing the construction of an outdoor sculpture for a Holocaust memorial. It was a grueling and massive undertaking that required architectural precision and deep emotional labor. It was also a sign that the unrealistic life would provide, as long as she had the courage to keep showing up.

Expanding Possibilities

Today, Elena's work is a kaleidoscope of disciplines. She is a writer, a photographer, a public speaker, and a visual artist.



To an outsider, these might look like scattered interests, but in Elena's life, they are a single ecosystem. Her photography serves as a visual journal, capturing the forgotten details that later fuel a paragraph or a painting.

In her workshops, she watches the creative spark catch fire in others. She has seen students of all ages and abilities discover hidden talents they did not know they possessed. Acknowledging that our obstacles are rarely external, but internal, she lives by the words of Anaïs Nin, who said, "When I look at the large green iron gate from my window, it takes on the air of a prison gate. An unjust feeling, since I know that human beings place on an object or a person, this responsibility of being the obstacle when the obstacle lies always within one's self."

The Invitation

Elena Hiatt Houlihan's life is not a prescription, and neither is her book. She is not giving step-by-step instructions or suggesting that everyone quit their jobs to become an artist or write a novel. Instead, she shares inspirational examples and poses deep questions.

Are you following a path you chose or one that was chosen for you? What does your ideal day look like? Where do you want to be in a physical, emotional, creative sense? Drawing on Joseph Campbell's philosophy, she believes that when you follow the path with heart, the universe conspires to help you. It sounds mystical, but for Elena, it is a practical truth. Her life stands as evidence that while the sensible path is safer, the unrealistic one is the only one that feels fully lived.

Elena's recently published book is available here: <https://elenahiathhoulihan.com/book>

