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BY TANIS HARGRAVE | PHOTOS BY JENNIFER FURMAN,
ELIZABETH LOPEZ AND TANIS HARGRAVE

There are places on this earth where the sky feels closer, where the air is thinner, the silence deeper, and the days stretch long like shadows on snow. I spent a week in one such place, high in the Canadian alpine, cooking for climbers and wanderers with hearts as wild as the landscape.

We called it the *kitchen in the clouds*, and it wasn't just a poetic name. Each morning began in the hush of early light, when the mountains still held the nights breathe. We stirred soups and stories side by side, the scent of bacon and scrambled eggs rising with the mist. There's something about cooking at altitude that humbles you, nothing is easy, but everything matters. Meals became more than meals; they were moments of warmth in a place where weather changes without warning and hunger is a constant companion.

It was there, amidst boiling pots and mountain air, that I met Elizabeth Lopez. At first, she seemed like any other participant: strong, quiet, a little reserved. Funny enough it was while waiting to use the THRONE (outhouse) that we first connected. This just to be clear is the most majestic toilet in the world. Confidently perched on stone and surrounded by peaks, offering more than just solitude as it came with a view that almost made you forget why you came. It was in this very fresh-air antechamber that Elizabeth and I bonded. Sometimes the world feels so vast, until a chance meeting reminds you how truly connected we are.

Chatting in the wilderness thousands of miles away from home it turned out Elizabeth lived an hour south of me. My journalistic mind suddenly went into overdrive, "Elizabeth would you consider becoming the Resident Feature for Audley North Magazine for the month of September?" And just like that I had my feature article!

Elizabeth is a retired professional engineer, meticulous, precise and rooted in systems. But along the way, she also followed a calling not many dare to, she became an artist. Not just an artist, but one who climbs mountain peaks to meet herself at the edge of the world. Her work explores mortality, motion, and our deep interconnectedness. When I returned home and visited her website, I found myself extremely moved. The honesty, the mystery, the quiet truth in her installations, literally blew me away.

In the alpine, everything is stripped back. There are no pretenses. You are your truest self, tired, exhilarated, sometimes overwhelmed, and in that space, bonds form quickly. Elizabeth and I connected not just as women walking new paths, but as creators. She with her hands and vision and myself with the love of food and a feeling for words.

She reminded me that we are all unfinished art, always reaching forward.

I came back from that mountaintop with more than sore legs and glacial-fed sourdough starter. I came back with renewed clarity, a kindred connection, and the reminder that sometimes, when you rise above the noise, you find what truly feeds your soul.

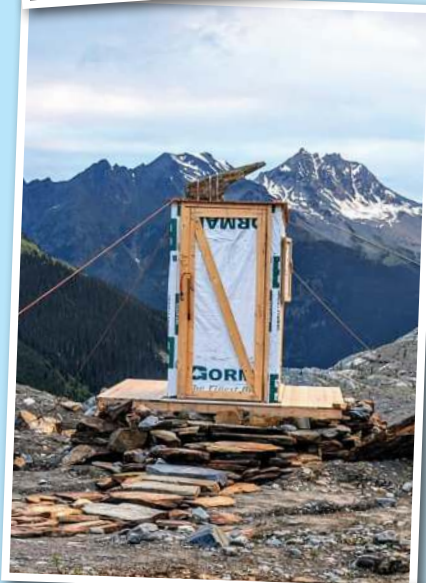
What began as a casual chat quickly turned into something much deeper, the story of a woman who has lived two overlapping and complementary lives: one grounded in science and technology, the other ignited by creativity, memory, and molten metal. Today I share Elizabeth's story with you.

Elizabeth Lopez spent over 40 years in the power generation industry (O.P.G. and related), her career rooted in engineering and the discipline of problem-solving. But long before she entered the world of controls and power, Elizabeth had always been drawn to the arts. **"I was always into drawing, painting, and making things as a kid,"** she told me. **"But then, you know, you have to pick a career."** For Elizabeth, math came easily, and the abstract beauty of electricity intrigued her.

Years into her engineering career, she began taking art classes, first as a way to **"balance her brain,"** then later, as a pathway to something more. Her journey led her to OCAD University, where she pursued a Bachelor of Fine Arts and then a Masters of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Art Media and Design. **"Being an artist is just another form of problem-solving,"** she said. **"To me, engineering and art have always belonged together."**

Today, Elizabeth's work is anything but conventional. Her artistic practice spans from sculptural paintings to participatory installations and cast iron sculpture. As a board member of the **Canadian Society for Contemporary Iron Arts**, she works with a team of artists and volunteers who perform public iron pours with their beloved furnace, **"Ruby"**. (described at www.cscia.ca)





"There's something so primal about molten iron," Elizabeth said. **"It's dangerous, glowing white, sparkling, there's this intense energy to it."** But it's also collaborative. She told me after a metal "pour", as a group they problem-solve, they keep each other safe. She adds that, **"My engineering background comes in handy during our safety debriefs. We always ask: What went well? What could have gone better?"**

Elizabeth's installations often invite the audience to interact physically, to move objects, leave footprints, or reflect their image in mirror balls and metal. **"I like sculptural pieces that you interact with your whole body"** She confides that her favourite piece is **"timespacematter-motion,"** a suspended log, metal-leafed and beautifully balanced suspended by climbing rescue gear (has a great pivot) and swings gently above a bed of sand. As participants push the log, they leave traces in the sand, footprints and motion lines that echo the theme of impermanence and impact.

"What are we leaving behind?" she asked. **"It's not the object; it's the effect of our actions. That's what stays."** This concept really got me thinking. It's not the object, but the overall effect. What actually lingers is the trace, the ripple, the impact it creates. Elizabeth's metaphor ties directly into how we carry and spread experiences, often unconsciously. In her world, art is not confined to a gallery; it's a moment, a motion, a residue of being. Through each piece she asks us to consider not just what we experienced but what are we leaving in our wake, this is so powerful! She explains it as kind of depositing that memory deep within and at the same time awakening other ones that were similar.

One of Elizabeth's most evocative works was inspired by a moment inside a glacial cave. Surrounded by layers of ancient ice at least ten-thousand years old, she noticed the tiny specks of silt suspended in the blue depths. Her quick eyes captured a moment that sparked the creation of a striking painting that now hangs in her hallway.

The colour blue in that piece is so deep and rich. She said **"It was the colour of the ice as the light filtered through it"**. This special piece is not just painted but has 12 layers of glazes, with dark silt-like bubbles playfully dotting the surface." The effect mirrors the essence of glacial ice, luminous, fragile, and filled with the hidden beauty of time.

Her connection to the natural world runs deep. Elizabeth has climbed and trekked across the globe, from the Himalayas to Kilimanjaro to the Canadian Rockies. Her passion for mountaineering is not only physical, but spiritual. **"I can't stand on a summit and look out at those unfolding ridges without feeling connected to the universe,"** she said. **"It's like you're part of something enormous. You're just a speck, but you belong."**

These experiences have deeply influenced her work. Her routed plywood paintings, metal-leafed and abstract, capture glacial silhouettes, wind lines, and the silvery reflections of Ontario's lakes. She often works with materials like bronze and aluminum, chosen not just for their properties, but for their symbolism.

"Materials carry meaning," she said. She is now thinking about working with Copper. **"Copper, for instance, is one of the first metals humans used. It's warm."**



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It holds memory. In Indigenous cultures, it has spiritual significance. These connections matter to me.

Elizabeth is also known for her fascination with mirror balls, reflective spheres that embody her philosophy of interconnection. As I walked to her front door I spied two large mirror balls displayed in her front garden. She often uses smaller ones in her installations and photography. ***"To me, mirror balls represent 'us', suspended in time and space,"*** she explained. ***"When you look into one, you see yourself, but also everything behind you. It's a 360-degree reflection of your place in the world."***

During one of her Alpine adventures, Elizabeth playfully placed mirror balls in a glacial stream and filmed their journey. The spheres bounced downstream, catching on obstacles then breaking free, similar to our own life journeys. This is what Elizabeth wants people to take away from her work, to find more purpose, to stop for a moment, to participate and be changed.

Whether she's suspended a glinting log or spinning a top through a bed of ashes, Elizabeth Lopez is always asking bigger questions: ***What does it mean to exist? What does it mean to move through space and time? What does it mean to leave a trace?***

Her work invites us to pause, to play, and to feel. And in doing so, it reminds us that we are not just observers of this world, we are participants.

And perhaps that's the greatest art of all. Her website is www.elizabethlopez.ca and she can be found on instagram: zabtime

I truly believe people come into our lives for a reason. Meeting Elizabeth stirred something in me, a reminder that the universe is vast, layered, and full of quiet invitations to wake up. Our conversation, her art, her energy, they have left a trace. She reminded me that we don't always need to understand the how or why. Sometimes, we just need to be open, to the idea that what we do matters. That our presence, our choices, and our creative sparks ripple outward in ways we never fully see.

I left our meeting changed. And like the sand on my shoes, I'll carry part of her with me, always.

NOTE: Elizabeth and I were part of an excursion arranged by the ACC (The Canadian Alpine Club of Canada). Founded in 1906, it's the nation's premier mountaineering organization, with a proud legacy rooted in exploration, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. Remarkably progressive for its time, the club was co-founded by surveyor A.O. Wheeler and journalist Elizabeth Parker, and was one of the first international alpine clubs to welcome women from the very beginning. Today, the ACC supports a vibrant community of over 10,000 members through 25 regional sections across Canada. It offers alpine training camps, publishes the respected Canadian Alpine Journal, and manages the largest network of backcountry huts in North America. Whether it's climbing, skiing, or simply soaking in the stillness of the high country, the ACC continues to inspire a deep connection to Canada's mountain landscapes.

