



Deborah Cavenaugh  
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## The Cultural Arts



A solo show spotlights recent works by Deborah Cavenaugh, a native of Wilmington, N.C., at the Debottis Gallery in West Chester through March

**Debottis Gallery.** Deborah Cavenaugh's solo show in West Chester features bright, colorful paintings of domestic settings. In nearly every one, there is the furniture of

ordinary life — beds, chairs, rugs, curtains, flower vases.

But Cavenaugh, a native of Wilmington, N.C., paints in colors and patterns that recall an Eastern European country or a Turkish *kilm* or perhaps Matisse after a visit to a textile factory.

Cavenaugh, whose distinctive style has earned her a wide following in galleries from Maine to Florida, does not shy away from describing herself as a self-taught former "stay-at-home" mom who took up painting after divorce.

She attributes her splashy style — with streaks and brush marks visible — in part to her initially misinformed notion that one should always paint "upright," or on an easel. With watercolors, most artists usually paint on a flat surface.

She began to paint in 1991, Cavenaugh explained recently, after her children had given her a box of cheap "toy-store" watercolors. Instead of painting on a table, she learned to prevent paint from dripping by developing an aggressive style.

"I paint fast, with a stiff acrylic brush," she said last week after braving a snowstorm to make it to West Chester from North Carolina.

While many self-taught artists find their niche fairly quickly, she seems to be a case study of what the art-buying public wants today. According to Cavenaugh — who describes her subjects as the "concept and comfort of home" — her work sells because it is positive yet genuine.

There is no artist behind the curtain here. In other words, she says,

she knows that the public wants to know about the artwork's creator.

One of her house paintings, for instance, includes an old-fashioned wooden pitchfork leaning outside a door and a flower-covered flag posted at a window. Viewers, she says, take note of such disparate cultural images and see them as evoking something artistic or creative.

"It looks like a house that an artisan made," she says.

Cavenaugh is up front about the biographical aspects of her art. She even writes what she's thinking on each canvas.

"I write up into a painting what I'm trying to learn, what I was thinking that day," she says. "My paintings are like a journal in that way."

The symbols or recurrent motifs in her work, such as a chair ("a place of repose"), are similarly designed to make her art accessible. They create what she calls "a space" for the viewer.

The exhibit includes works created from torn magazines and still-lives of such traditional subjects as bowls of fruit, but, again, there is always something just off kilter: The bowl is too tiny, or the table cloth clashes with the wallpaper.

Cavenaugh believes that viewers don't mind such "cockamamie" arrangements because, attuned to the chaos of daily life, they themselves are natural organizers.

The Debottis Gallery is at 113 N. High St. in West Chester. The exhibit is to continue through March 3. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday.