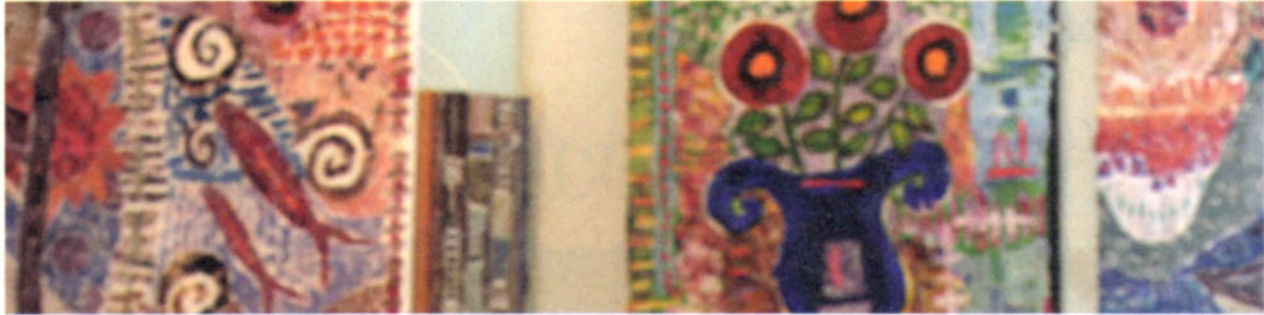


Southern exposure | Deborah Cavanaugh



RENOWNED ARTIST BRINGS COLOR TO ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE



Deborah Cavanaugh never set out to be an artist. She took an art class in middle school, just as so many youngsters do when they're first given the chance to choose an elective. "In school, there's always kids who are the artists," she says. "I wasn't one of them." After getting a B-minus in the class, she then straight-A student turned her attention back to other studies. She would go on to obtain a degree in behavior modification from the University of Virginia.

She wouldn't turn her attention back to art until years later, after a painful divorce transplanted her from Washington, D.C., to Wilmington. Her two young children, Hunter and Layne, had given her a set of watercolors for Mother's Day just as her marriage was coming to an end, and she used the gift and painting as a way to channel her grief. For her first year in Wilmington, she renovated a historic home at North 18th and Chestnut streets, and painted with those watercolors.

When the house was complete, she visited a local shop to have her artwork framed. She wanted to display the bright pieces as a reminder of how one can emerge from a dark place into a life filled with happiness and color. She was surprised when the Wilmington shop owner made a fuss over her work and encouraged her to do more. Her son's worry that, with the house completed, she would have to get a job was further encouragement. "He came to me and asked if he was going to have to start getting in the after-school care line instead of the mommy line," she says.

Initially, she supported her calling with commissioned work - portraits of families, pets and homesteads. With each assignment, she would find out what mattered to the family and discreetly include those elements in the work. Today, her commissioned pieces are even more in demand, with one recently commanding \$10,000. Most, however, are in the \$300 to \$800 range.

In the 15 years since that first trip to the frame shop, Cavanaugh's audience has grown to the far reaches of the world. Her original paintings, prints and card lines are distributed internationally. Her watercolors, many of them beach and garden scenes or still-lives inscribed with handwritten affirmations ("I'm believing that all things are possible"), emit a kind of hard-won serenity. "The affirmations are me allowing you to know about me, just as an audience relates to song lyrics," she says. "The audience has to get what the song is saying to them, or it won't work. It may have been written about the loss of a best friend, but you connect to it because you've just sent a child off to college."

Cavanaugh's latest painting "life is easy on the isle of dreams" is featured on the limited-edition 2009 *StarNews* Collectors Cup, which is available through the holiday season. "I don't know how to fix anything that's wrong in the world right now," she says. "I am not a schooled artist; I can't draw a straight line; but I know my art encourages people."

I EVENTUALLY GET TO THE POINT WHERE MY HEART GETS TOO FULL AND I MUST PAINT.

Cavanaugh never intended great wealth from her passion, only to connect with people, make ends meet and send her two children to college. "I'm always willing to look at what I've got and what I know," she says. "I'm good at talking to people through my art." Her rewards, though, have been much greater than she ever imagined. Hunter, now 27, graduated from the University of Virginia with a film studies degree. In addition to creating and managing her award-winning Web site (www.DeborahCavanaugh.com), he's nearly finished with his first screenplay. Layne, now 23, graduated a year ago from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. During the summer between her junior and senior years, she interned for then first lady Laura Bush. Following graduation, she joined John McCain's campaign team. "That's what has made my life worth it," Cavanaugh says. "I hit it out of the park with my kids."

A year ago, she opened a gallery at 5028 Wrightsville Ave., near Cape Fear Hospital, and began to spread her artist wings in other directions. She has begun creating what she calls torn paper mosaics, large paintings that incorporate small torn pieces of paper from magazines. From a distance, the pieces resemble broken tiles. She's also added jewelry to her collection, begun renovating old furniture and started dabbling in interior design. With the furniture line, Cavanaugh's relationship with her audience continues to evolve. The furniture, typically old pieces not considered antiques, see new life through her vision. "Everyone and everything deserves a second chance," she says. "We have furniture that means something to us, but it's junk now. I want to turn it into something you can't throw away."

Already Cavanaugh works 12-hour days, six days a week, and with such a focus on these new avenues for her art, the blank canvases in the back of her studio could collect dust. But they won't.

"I eventually get to the point where my heart gets too full and I must paint," she says.

Her next series will be inspired by Francine Mazursky, a minor character in a book she read many years ago. Francine is an every-woman who has guided Cavanaugh through the years. "She lives by the sea and is mindful that for most of us, even the toughest days you'd give anything to get back once they're gone," Cavanaugh says. "She helps me focus on what really counts."

- Pam Sander

STARNEWS COLLECTORS CUP

The latest in a nearly two decade-long series, includes a replica of artist Deborah Cavanaugh's 'life is easy on the isle of dreams (Bald Head Island); which depicts the waterfront at Bald Head Island. The cup is available for \$9.95 at the *StarNews*, 1003 S. 17th St. in Wilmington. For more information about the series, go to www.StarNewsOnline.com/starnews-cup.

