

Art of affirmation

Paintings have helped her make it through

BY JOHN STATON
STAFF WRITER

Wilmington artist Deborah Cavanaugh began her painting career in 1992 at age 40, as her 20-year marriage was ending.

Since then, she has gone on an amazing and unlikely journey that's taken her from the depths of despair to a place where she is totally tuned in to beauty. Her bright watercolors, many of them beach and garden scenes or still-lives inscribed with handwritten affirmations ("I'm believing that all things are possible"), are instantly recognizable and emit a kind of hard-won serenity. The popularity of her work is such that she's been able to support herself and put two kids through college.

Cavanaugh said she considers herself "an Americana painter," and one can see something of the folksy outsider artist in her paintings as well as in her newer, more abstract works, many of which are mosaic-like collages composed of scraps of paper torn from magazines.

Though she hasn't been low-profile for some time, Cavanaugh has had her work in the public eye even more than usual lately. She had a big show at downtown Wilmington's Caffe Phoenix a couple of months ago. Around the corner, her work is on display at the brand-new Union Cafe (formerly Roy's Riverboat). And on Friday and Saturday, she's inviting the public to visit her studio at Acme Art.

Had you done the open studio thing before this year?

I've done it from time to time. This year, I've made a commitment to be more in the world with my art. People are very shy about contacting artists. They're almost apologetic: "I hate to bother you, but I'd like to buy a painting" (laughs).

You talk a lot about your philosophy. Can you describe it for me?

I want to be an encouragement with my art. Life is hard, but it is also beautiful, it is also good. We all feel like our own travails are the only travails there are, but everybody's going through stuff, and you have to get your eyes off the ground and up into the future that you're trying to find. I want to sit around

every day and proclaim the list of all that is possible. That's the only way that any good thing can really happen to you. You have to be open to it. If you proclaim the list of what's going wrong, then all you see are the other wrong things.

The words you put into your paintings, are they, like, little pieces of your philosophy?

Absolutely, they reflect my philosophy. The same as anyone who writes, there are thematic threads I come back to. And sometimes, I just say the same thing over again so that I know it. I probably have four or five paintings that are simply called "I am choosing happiness."

You had a fire at a different studio in 1999. Did you lose a lot of your work?

I lost everything when that studio burnt to the ground. I probably lost roughly 50 original paintings. I lost my whole print and card line. I also had a journal and a book line. All that burned up in the fire. And I had about 250 pieces of painted furniture. I mean, it was huge.

It's a wonder your style didn't become dark and depressing.

Well, you know, it was the most challenging time of my life in many ways. There's like 2 percent of you that says, "Keep going," and then there's like 98 percent that says, "Go to Wal-Mart and get a job!" (laughs)

Going back to your origins as an artist, I've always loved the story about how you first started painting because of the toy watercolor set your children gave you. You've said that you started painting more or less to make them happy, so if that was your initial inspiration, what continues to inspire you?

I'm still actually very inspired by my children and the faith they have in me. I have a line that I say: "I'm trying to be the person my children think I am."

If someone had told you in April of '91 or '92 what you'd be doing today, what would you have said?

I would've never believed it. If someone had shown me a video or said, "Here's what's going to happen today: A guy from the



PHOTO | KATE LORD

SPECIAL OCCASION: Deborah Cavanaugh made small original paintings for the opening of her studio this weekend. The pieces will be for sale at a more affordable price than her larger works.

newspaper's going to come, and a photographer, and they're going to talk to you about painting, about being an artist and what it means to you," I would've said, "That is preposterous." And that just makes me realize that anything is possible in my life. And in everyone's life.

How has your art changed or developed since you started 16 years ago?

I think I'm able to be much more complex. I've gained so much confidence in my draw-

ing. When I first started, I was afraid to even draw. The other thing I can say, with 100 percent certainty that I'm telling the truth, is that the years of doing my art have made me a better person. Like, after the fire, I had to ask myself, "Do I believe what I write on my paintings? Do I believe it, or am I just making this stuff up?" And if I believe what I write, I'm going to stand up and go again.

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