

Two lives less 'Ordinary'

With a joint show of new work, a pair of popular local painters take different routes to arrive in similar places

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The author C.S. Lewis once wrote, "A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading," so proceed with caution.

Similarly, the paintings and personal stories of two of Wilmington's most commercially successful artists, Deborah Cavanaugh and Ivey Hayes — whose first joint show, *A Celebration of Ordinary Times*, is opening at FastFrame Friday — are real-life miracles.

"I'd never been anything but married," Cavanaugh said. "No one is more surprised than me" when it comes to her artistic ability and success. When she was a newly single parent of two who relocated to Wilmington, her children gave her a set of toy-store watercolors for Mother's Day. Humoring them, she painted with the amateur set. Those first paintings, done in 1992, quickly sold at a local frame shop. Cavanaugh has been a full-time artist ever since.

"Everything I knew about painting I learned from Woody Allen's *New York Stories*," Cavanaugh said of her early days, imitating the movie's oil painter whose canvases were tacked to the wall, developing her now signature style of drippy, loose watercolors painted upright. But what is often thought of as a faux pas for the medium is what allows Cavanaugh to achieve the dream-like movement of her paintings, a view through the bottom of a glass of lemonade, created from life's lessons.

"I had a very hard childhood," Cavanaugh said at her studio in Acme Art. "With poverty comes other harsh things."

Looking at her bright watercolors of women content in their whimsical gardens or sweeping the porch of their dream house floating on a saturated, royal blue ocean, the corner of each canvas kissed with a curlicue title of inspiring statements such as, "This is my once upon a time," we don't see her struggle. Her paintings are "what I feel, what I hope ... my own longings: to wake up happy



LEFT: 'I Am Here - The World Spins On,' watercolor on gesso board by Deborah Cavanaugh. RIGHT: 'Catch of the Day,' acrylic on canvas by Ivey Hayes.

every day, to be a good friend, to inspire." Her commercial success is in part due to the universality of those longings. (She has shown those illustrations of her ideal inner life across the country, and her line of greeting cards is now available in Europe and Canada.)

Hayes also paints scenes of ordinary life skewed with elements of fantasy, and both artists paint people that are faceless so that, as Hayes says, "You put your own features on the face."

While Cavanaugh's figures are mostly Caucasian women, Hayes' figures are black silhouettes. The cut-out figures are pure black, and as Hayes said during an interview at his Wilmington studio, not necessarily because they are African-American, but because black "works well with all the other colors around it."

His acrylic paintings are figurative, of an earlier generation of manual labor and hand-washed laundry, but he says "the first priority is for the colors to sing."

His palette is unpredictable but consistent: lavender trees, burnt sienna skies and angular layers of multi-color ocean folding into each other. The same is true for the conflicting styles and distorted perspective

WANT TO GO?

WHAT: A Celebration of Ordinary Times, new paintings from Ivey Hayes and Deborah Cavanaugh

WHEN: Opening reception is 5-8 p.m. Friday. Exhibits hangs through Sept. 22.

WHERE: FastFrame, 1319 Military Cutoff Road in the Landfall Center, Wilmington

DETAILS: 256-1105

of his paintings: baskets of blueberries or birds will be painted in perfect realism, opposing the more cubist shapes of his black figures and their bold, patterned clothing. The shape of the figures themselves mimic the sensation of standing at the wide bottom of the empire state building looking up to the distant top, though his backgrounds include the horizon. But somehow it is all harmonious.

"All I had to do was be dedicated and very, very sincere about the gift God gave me," Hayes said. "I take no credit at all."

He is as humble and as dignified as his shadow figures, cotton workers he adorns in lush, ornate, flowing cloth "to say: you are somebody." Observing the laundress in *Purple Rhythm*, you can smell the hot air of baked

sheets and sense the dance she brings to this chore.

His painting process is the result of divine intervention. "As far as art, I didn't beg for it or plead for it. It was given to me," said Hayes, a former police officer. "He would show me something, four or five paintings, one behind the other."

When these visual spiritual experiences began — as he says, "you knew something

was taking place in your life that was not normal" — he balked. For five or six years he continued to paint the photo-realistic watercolors he knew, but became unable to finish. It wasn't working.

He finally accepted the contact from the otherworldly voice — in a sense, giving up his control for a divine channel — and painted the images. It's what he does to this day despite the crippling rheumatoid arthritis that confines him to crutches and warps his hands.

"The paintings take me. I am a paint pusher," Hayes said. "I know when the painting is finished, when it's incomplete, when it's a failure, when it's a great piece of art. I just know." His realized visions have been shown across the country and go for the prettiest penny in town.

"Ivey Hayes and I both paint for the people," Cavanaugh said.

Both artists are singers and can visually rejoice in the roles — mother, sister, brother, community member — they've played. They are inclusive people who seek a union with humanity. To reach their audiences, Cavanaugh had to "let my true being out" and Hayes had to let a true being in.

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