

Thousand Islands Sun VACATIONER

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P.O. BOX 277, ALEXANDRIA BAY, NEW YORK 13607

From Hair to Here: Artist Mary Randazzo

By Kristina Rusho, Staff Writer

"A sincere artist is not one who makes a faithful attempt to put on to canvas what is in front of him, but one who tries to create something which is, in itself, a living thing."

- William Dobell

For many artists, the 1000 Islands region has been a source of inspiration when placing brush to canvas. With so many potential pieces a mere breathe away, it isn't a surprise that Mary Randazzo finds her creativity flourishing in the natural settings of the St. Lawrence River. It was, however, a small, not-well-kept secret, even to her family.

When Phil Randazzo, Mary's husband, saw the painting of "The Frontenac" at their home in California he was puzzled as to its origins.

"Where did that come from?" He asked Mary.

"I painted it," she replied.

After a moment, he looked again in disbelief.

"No you didn't."

In fact, Mary had created her first piece based on the post office building called The Frontenac on Round Island. She had taken photographs of the historic location and brought the images with her back to California. She studied book after book on the methods of oil painting, seeking out knowledge and perfecting her own approach to the world of art. It is that hard work and determination that has sustained her through many years of work, trying times and uncertainty.

"I didn't know anyone would want to look at it, I knew that I just wanted to do it," Mary says.

She is a perceptive woman with a keen eye always turned towards the outdoors, looking for the skies turning gray and blue on the day of our interview. From the studio in her home in Clayton, ships



Mary Randazzo at work on a new piece in her studio in her Clayton home, the river flowing by in the background.

pass by, carrying their cargo to Montreal perhaps. On the dock, a heron perches briefly, scanning the waters in the bay for a meal before taking flight again. This is her sanctuary. Mary is also a firm believer in preserving the history and beauty that she has discovered on the St. Lawrence River, which was one of the driving reasons she was determined to capture her love of The Frontenac.

"I got some paints and just

started messing around with it. It's such an amazing place (The Frontenac). That was our daughter's first job. The people there are amazing."

It wasn't until after the early 1990's (1994 or 1995 Mary recalls) that Mary began to pursue her artwork on a more permanent basis. "My mother was sick, I was taking care of her and in California, there isn't the quiet like there is here. There isn't the time."

Mary Randazzo isn't sure where the gift for her work came from. What she is sure of is that she cannot draw two straight lines for the life of her.

"They say it's important to know how to draw," Mary muses. "I can't do it. But I can paint."

"Sometimes, it feels as if I'm disconnected, like it's hard to describe. It's definitely God-given."

Fascinated by the history of color ("There are thousands," she exclaims. "Just too many to explore...") and inspired by the scenes just past the glass of her window, Mary Randazzo is a self-taught painter with a reputation of working on another type of "art."

Employed early in her career as a hairstylist, Mary was a pioneer in the world of hair color. She was involved mainly with Sunlitz products, developing a safer way for woman to color their hair.

"That was my art for years, doing hair coloring and styles. I felt that I was working with people to help them find their "best self-beauty."

While she researches every subject of her work, Mary is constantly looking for ways to shed insight into the history of the area.

"I'm drawn to painting places where people have loved nature or have loved themselves or both.

There is something about these places that is timeless. It cannot be replaced."

Each piece is distinctive in its vitality, a culmination of man's ingenuity and nature's raw talent to survive. There is her work "Calumet Sunflowers," where what is left of Charles Emery's water tower stands looming in the background. The sunflowers, in contrast, are bright and fulfilling, the yellows and blue skies reminding Mary of what she calls a "lazy summer day."

"The 1000 Islands Bridge" piece also holds her mix of man and Mother Earth to task. A girl stands in the middle of a field, her hair tossed by the wind. The bridge spans the sky overhead, another wonder of man's necessity to move forward and be connected. Her latest work, "Meet Me at the Opera," was inspired by the restoration efforts on the Clayton Opera House. People mull about the stairs leading into the lit building, dressed circa the early 1900's. The earliest vehicles clash with the horse-drawn carriages, a sign of changing times.

"Locals would go there to have a good time. It was the first building to have electricity. The lights, those dirt roads, it was a completely different era for the people of Clayton."

There is a sense of calm that is refreshing about Mary's work. It is a trait that can be associated to her quiet and thoughtful nature as she continues to expand her collection of works. Above all though, Mary is certain that she would not have even come this far without the support of her family.

"They continue to tell me I can do this, every artist needs to hear that," Mary smiles. "Without them, well, I don't know really."