

‘I have fun with it’

Annie Harris finds ‘Common Ground’ in joyful images

Amanda Karioth Thompson

Council on Culture & Arts

If you meet up with artist and retired educator Annie S. Harris, it’s likely you’ll leave with a unique treasure. Harris says she always sends people home with something after a coffee date or chance meet-up.

She’s gifted hand-drawn bookmarks and painted wine bottles. One day on a visit to Atlanta, she met a woman wearing a T-shirt she had created. The woman explained how her friend had given her the shirt as a gift, and after chatting with Harris, she walked away ready to purchase a few more.

Harris likes to tell people that she didn’t take many art classes in school. She didn’t earn a degree in the subject. Rather, art found her in a time of great need.



Annie Harris

“When you go through something pretty traumatic, you need a way to get out of it and do something amazing,” explains Harris, who first picked up a pad and pencil after going through a divorce. “When you want to keep your family in school, you do things to keep them happy and get them and yourself through.

Doing art gave me a chance to express myself and do what I like to do. It was good for me on the inside.”

Harris spent 16 years at Godby High School as a teacher, and later, an assistant principal. She left for 11 years to work in the Brevard County school system as a principal before returning to Tallahassee as Leon County’s assistant superintendent for teaching and learning.

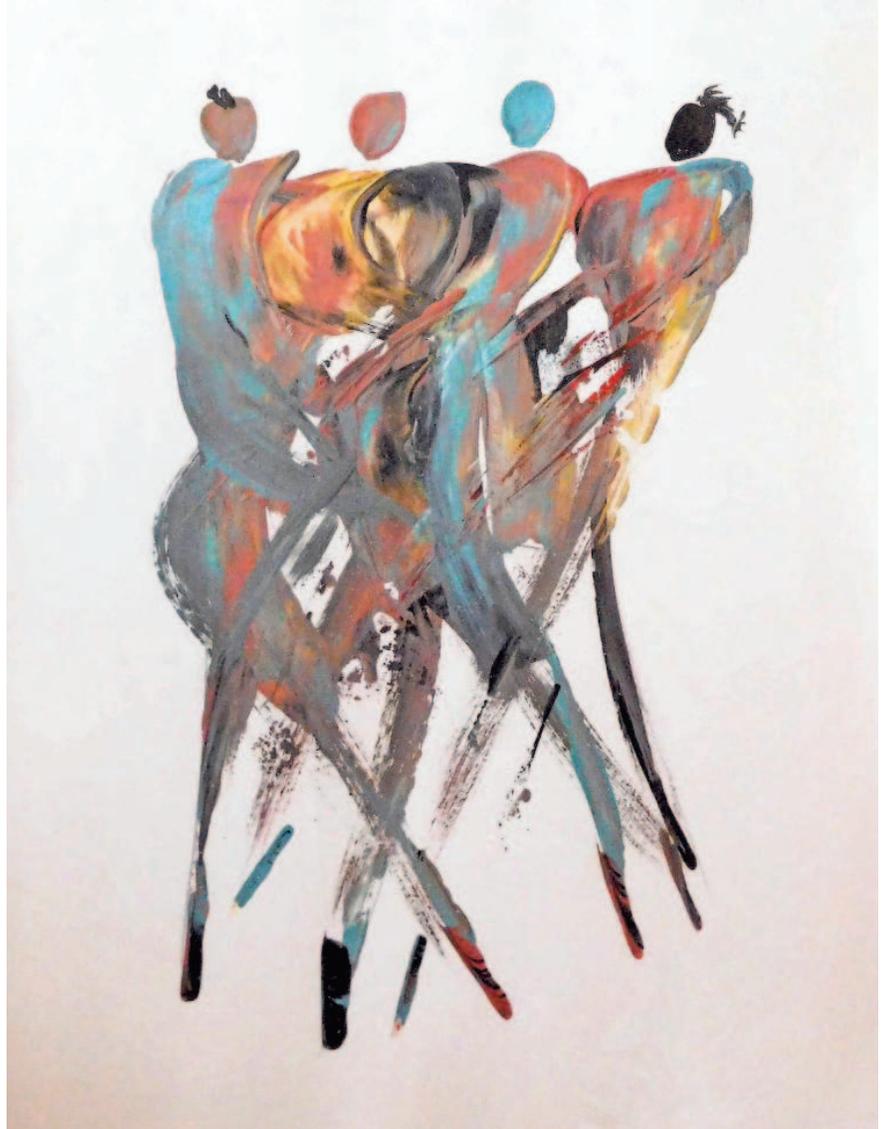
She has showcased works across the city, including the Artport Gallery, FAMU’s Claude Pepper Center, and now, at the City Hall Art Gallery which re-opens to the public this month. The “Common Ground” exhibition, presented by the Council on Culture & Arts (COCA), is the first one back at City Hall since last March’s COVID-19 shut-down.

Harris discovered her artistic abilities while living in Central Florida. She created a greeting card that advised to “never lose sight of your dream,” and left it on her desk one day at school. Her secretary noticed it and encouraged Harris to continue making them. Eventually, she placed the cards in a local consignment shop and hotel lobby and was surprised as they sold quickly.

“I have fun with it,” says Harris. “It makes me happy and other people happy.”

This bold freedom and joy are tangible in Harris’ painting style. She captures women in vivid reds, yellows and blues in her “Three Queens” piece. Their faces are missing distinctive features like eyes or mouths, but Harris

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“Saturday Night” by Annie Harris. Harris has a no-frills attitude towards artmaking and a belief that you can make anything without having to buy expensive materials.

AMANDA KARIOTH THOMPSON

If you go

What: Common Ground: Artworks by Annie S. Harris

When: Exhibition opens 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Friday from Feb. 10-April 26, 2021

Where: City Hall Art Gallery, 300 South Adams St. and at COCA’s Online Gallery

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit COCA’s Online Gallery at www.cocaonlinegallery.zenfolio.com.

Harris

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says she prefers viewers to fill in the blanks when it comes to her more abstract figures.

Harris never sketches out an idea before diving in. When she is out and about traveling, something will catch her eye and trigger her creativity. Glass and other “throwaway” items have become her primary surfaces for acrylics. Windowpanes in particular offer many surprises as she completes a new work.

“I like painting on unusual things like glass because you can hang it two ways,” says Harris. “It’s almost what life is like. A person shows you one side of themselves but not the other side. It’s beautiful. I like the view on the other side too, so I hang it so I can show it either way.”

Harris opened up her own home gallery in 1999. Nestled on the 400 block in Frenchtown, she wanted to create a hub where people could come by to both see and experience art. Given her roots as an educator, she naturally gravitated towards helping young people uncover their own hidden talents.

When she meets a child that has potential, she will nurture their creative spirit and show their parents what can be made with very few materials. She has a no-frills attitude towards artmaking and belief that you can make anything without having to buy expen-

sive materials.

During her many art walks and events, Harris will feature a children’s section where these kids can sell their artwork. She then schools both child and parent in the importance of investing money in the child’s very own bank account.

“I teach them about business and the things you do with your own talent, a pencil and paper,” says Harris. “You can do things that are really beautiful and teach them how to save money and buy their own supplies. The kids like it and learn business skills fast.”

The “Common Ground” exhibit showcases a variety of Harris’ glass paintings and other mixed media artwork. The title of the show is a nod to her belief that we can gain strength through our common bonds and lift each other up to overcome struggles.

Harris continually learns by questioning other artists’ processes and engaging in her own experimentation. She recently started painting on bits of mirror to see what would happen — though she doesn’t enjoy it as much as the transparent windowpanes which give her a renewed perspective.

“You can see yourself in some of your own drawings, and it helps you get through tough times,” says Harris. “It’s a gift you can give to somebody else, too.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).