

# Honey Hilliard slathers paintings with life

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In the midst of teaching her weekly Art Club class, artist and entrepreneur Honey Hilliard engaged in an unexpected collaboration. Her 2-year-old ran into the studio, picked up a brush, and put a giant glob of bright red paint in the middle of Hilliard's floral painting.

"I try not to get too prissy about my work," smiles Hilliard. "I loved it and left it there. With acrylics you can layer over anything, and sometimes a bright color can wake up a painting and bring in new life."

Collaboration is key for Hilliard as she hosts and attends multiple events with artists and business owners in the Tallahassee community. Along with her paintings, she's a creator of many products such as ArmScarvz, which sell nationally and internationally, printed notecards that can be found in local museums, and miniature canvas paintings. A lover of storytelling, Hilliard is also the author and illustrator of an interactive color-along children's book "Looking for Butterflies," and a soon to be published color-along book of worms.

"The books have some monochromatic pencil illustrations that the reader can color so their brush strokes or pencil marks become part of the book," explains Hilliard, who is looking forward to her new book. "Growing up, I used to draw these little cartoon worms with clothes, hair bows, and names that always stuck with me. Willy and Wilma worm have always wanted to be in a book, and it will help kids learn to build their own compost and grow fat worms and healthy dirt."

Since Hilliard was old enough to hold a crayon, she recalls drawing little circles and sketches of her surroundings. Her mother noticed her early aptitude and placed her in weekend art classes at Valdosta State University. Though she was many decades behind the other students in age, Hilliard became enraptured with each new assignment creating still life portraits and sketches.

"I always felt the need to document my surroundings and loved to draw people, animals and little critters I would find outside," recalls Hilliard. "I still do that and try to as often as possible weave it into my career. It's become something that I can do and offer to connect with others."

Hilliard came to Florida State University on an academic scholarship and earned a degree in art. Right after graduation, she began a job as an illustrator for Florida Fish and Wildlife. Her first assignment was to create a bird identification poster that, nearly 20 years later, is still in circulation in



Artist and author Honey Hilliard holds a weekly art club.

HONEY HILLIARD



schools, libraries, and parks around the state as an educational tool. Hilliard believes it's her most well-known piece of artwork, and creating it used her skills in accuracy and realistic drawing.

She was given the opportunity to be an assistant to her childhood art teacher, Kippy Hammond, in France one summer, furthering her education in impressionist painting and creating a series of 25 paintings over her time there. Margaret Dyer, a pastel painter from Atlanta, was one of the teachers at Hammond's retreat and became another mentor to Hilliard. She also looks up to masters like Matisse, Van Gogh, and Modigliani for their textured work.

"Sometimes accuracy made me feel a little like I was choking the painting," says Hilliard of her past work. "I wanted something more alive and to see the brushstrokes. Once you've done those accurate illustrations, it's hard not to get into the detail, so I have to force myself to stop and use fatter paint-brushes or a blurry photo reference. I want to keep the life in the painting."

As Hilliard matured as an artist she began challenging herself with acrylic and oil paints, and more expressive work. Using layers and a palette life, she likes to have hints of past coats peeking through and will even use thick gels and roof spackling to give more body to her work.

In terms of subject matter, birds still show up on her canvas, in addition to the glamorous women, flowers, but-

## If you go

**What:** Art Club

**When:** 6-8 p.m. Wednesdays

**Where:** 1620 N. M L King Blvd

**Cost:** \$20 per student, \$25 for drop-ins

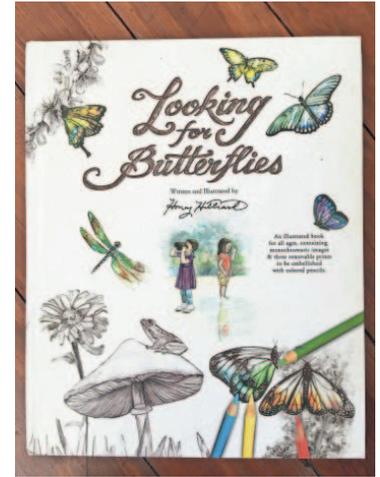
**Contact:** For more information, call 850-321-3232 or visit [www.honeyhilliard.com](http://www.honeyhilliard.com).

terflies, and other natural elements. Hilliard also pays attention to the symbolism of certain images when crafting her compositions.

"I like to pay attention to animals that show up in my life," states Hilliard. "Native Americans believed animals were messengers from heaven. I do a lot of research on my paintings which is part of the curiosity that leads me to be inspired to do a painting."

A painting of Cleopatra is framed with poppies, hemlock, and wolfsbane — as those were the three plants she allegedly used to poison herself with — along with the Egyptian bird, the Green Bee Eater, which was believed to be a soul guide for the recently departed. One of her favorite portraits of Marilyn Monroe surrounds the late actress with poisonous pitcher plants that have butterflies teetering on the edge of their open maws.

Hilliard is drawn to these complex female characters from history and weaves her paintings with hidden narratives. Some stories are more light-hearted such as the Bejeweled Forest series. Her fictional forest sprung from an idea to paint noble creatures like swans, peacocks, and doves with jeweled bodies and crowns. Just as she creates her published children's stories, Hilliard becomes the author of her paintings as well, turning to daily jour-



HONEY HILLIARD

Honey Hilliard has a children's book on butterflies.

nal to guide her inspirations.

"Journaling helps a lot in knowing where to go and what to do next when you're an entrepreneur," says Hilliard. "I am my own boss and committee, and when I need to connect with spirit or my higher self, I remind myself to journal. Sometimes I get really specific directions that I just know I have to take."

She has begun hosting weekly journaling classes at various locations to help others get in touch with their inner creativity. Additionally, she hosts a weekly Art Club in her private studio, dabbling in charcoal and other drawing techniques to build a student's portfolio. Classes contain anywhere from four to ten students, and Hilliard says the goal of each session is to produce one finished painting. Ultimately, Hilliard hopes that both by teaching and sharing her art, she might inspire others to get in touch with their original voice.

"I like to offer specific techniques, but I don't think there's a one size fits all way of teaching," says Hilliard. "For some, I'll give them a few strokes to get going and then send them on their way. I like to encourage people to reach for their own inspiration and guidance as opposed to telling them how to paint something. At some point we get discouraged, and I want to get students back in touch with their confident creator."

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](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).