

Apalachicola artist's gems capture coastal history

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Apalachicola artist Susan L. Richardson believes each of her paintings tells a different story depending on how she's looking at it. The two works she recently submitted to the month-long PEARLS (preserving and embracing Apalachicola's rich legacy of shotguns) art exhibit are a perfect example of her wide range of skills and points of view.

"No Trespassing" uses an impressionistic palette of cool colors to depict one of the area's historic shotgun homes, while her "No Name Shotgun," contrasts with shocks of yellow, green, and orange.

"I don't use the same color palette all the time, it's just how I work to interpret what I'm looking at," says Richardson, who is honored to be a part of Apalachicola's latest exhibit in support of saving these homes. "The outpouring of support from the community was astounding, with over seventy percent of the artwork sold on opening night."

The PEARLS exhibit is on display at the Cotton Warehouse (Center for Culture, History and Art) throughout April and features a variety of artists of all ages, experiences, and mediums. The exhibit is part of a month-long festival of events, which is Apalachicola's solution to raising awareness and renovating its historic houses to provide affordable housing as an alternative to allowing apartment buildings to encroach on the landscape.

"The empowering of an entire neighborhood is so uplifting," says Richardson. "It's much better for the community to restore what's already here and have the neighborhood be proud of it."

Richardson was born into a creative London-based family, her father being both an art teacher and pastel artist. She preferred watercolors, but eventually stopped painting altogether when she moved to America and began her multitude of career paths.

Always an entrepreneur, highlights from her bio list her as "headhunter,

restaurateur, inventor, golf ball hunter, fruit and vegetable picker, car washer ... women's accessories representative and jewelry designer/manufacturer/wholesaler." Her jewelry line, cheekily named Stick It In Your Ear, was met with much success and still gets some buzz online.

"I love playing on words, so all my earrings and pieces were on cards that said Stick It In Your Ear," laughs Richardson. "I also signed the back of each piece, so people find jewelry at estate sales with Susan L. Richardson on the back and have no idea about the business. I did it in the late 80s and 90s so now it shows up on eBay as vintage jewelry."

The stock market crash of 2008 got her thinking of going back to her first passion, painting, as a way of supplementing her income. Richardson attended a few oil painting workshops on St. George Island and around Apalachicola and became, as she says, "a paint-



SUSAN RICHARDSON

No Name Shotgun is one of Susan Richardson's works at the PEARL exhibit.

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ing fool.”

Her first two teachers were Henry Van Winkle and Judy Soprano, both responsible for reigniting her return to the canvas. She also worked with Ken Dewaard, a plein air painter whom Richardson admires for being a colorist. Her decision to go to oil versus watercolor came as a result of taking these classes and discovering the medium's strengths. “To me, you can mold oil like clay in a way that has much greater depth than watercolor, and I love the feel of oil and being able to push it around,” says Richardson. “The more you paint the better you get at getting looser, and I call that painting with abandon. You can do your best work when you’re painting with abandon.”

The amount of inspiration she finds in the Apalachicola area continues to astound Richardson. Her subject matter alternates between structures, people, and animals more so than just landscape alone. Though she does find continual inspiration in the historic town’s “rivers, estuaries, bays and Gulf waters.” Plein air painting and workshops allows her to explore these interests, and she won The Forgotten Coast Plein Air Invitational ‘Quickdraw’ event Best Emerging Artist 2011 award.

Richardson recalls her first time trying plein air, a practice where artists paint outside in the open, and she quickly learned its challenges.

“The weather has to be in your favor,” states Richardson. “The first time I was painting in a state park, the only place I could get out of the wind and weather was behind the boathouse with a rusty old door, so I painted the door and the door handle. People would go by and love it because they hadn’t seen that subject matter before.”

Over 30 of Richardson’s paintings have been accepted into juried shows in both Florida and Georgia, and several have won awards and honorable mentions. Her style is largely dependent on the subject matter she paints, and she prefers to mix her colors on the canvas.

She most enjoys putting the composition of a painting together. If she’s working on plein air, she will spend more time pre-planning, while other paintings might begin in their first hour looking like “absolutely nothing” until it develops and the painting begins talking to her in a sense. If the painting doesn’t speak at all, Richardson simply wipes it out and starts again.

“Different structures and subjects speak to you

If you go

What: PEARLS Art Show Exhibition
When: Open through the end of April (times may vary)
Where: Cotton Warehouse, Center for Culture, History and Art, Water Street, Apalachicola
Cost: Admission is free
Contact: For more information, call 850-918-3594 or visit <http://www.saveourshotguns.org/>.

differently so I can go from very loose to very tight because of how it speaks to me of how it ought to be,” describes Richardson. “Composition is really important, as are its values, the lights and darks. You can’t tell a story without the lights and darks. The act in itself I think is a magical thing as it all sort of happens on its own.”

Richardson tries to create works that are atmospheric or evoke a certain time and place. She’s currently enamored with painting the colorful street scenes and people she saw on a recent trip to Cuba, and

finds inspiration in painting with environments. Among her top picks from her body of work is “Siesta Time,” where she captured a fisherman pulling in his oyster boat from the dock in a haze of purples, greens and grays.

Aside from environmental paintings, she is drawn to portraits as they depict “a fraction in time.” Richardson’s “Old Salt Christo At 80,” shows an older man with his beard cascading down the canvas and framed on all sides by a red hat, shirt, and aura. Her biggest claim to fame however is “The Man,” which has been featured in several exhibitions and recently placed second out of over 200 submissions — the man’s expressivity caught her eye immediately, as she used warm browns and ochre to capture his face.

“I paint all sorts of subjects but I feel like I’m documenting a historic area,” says Richardson, who describes herself as deeply passionate in everything she does. “It’s a magnificent form of expression, especially in a historic town. I think art is a great communicator.”

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).



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