

Artist Sherry Allen shows her stripes at Brush Strokes

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Walking between seven to nine miles a day, artist Sherry Allen is often on the move. As a country dance competitor, she holds four world titles and relishes excursions that involve biking, kayaking, or hiking — anything that brings her closer to nature.

It's in these settings that she thrives and sees with a painter's perspective. She takes photos that will later be referenced back in the studio. That's where Allen envisions how she'll capture the critters that live among the trees, beaches, waterways, and open spaces on her canvas.

"I push the color and identify with the animal," said Allen on her style and subject matter. "I use an intensification of shades and color, so it's not totally realistic, but it's not abstract either. I also use the focus of the shot to make some sort of emotional connection with the animals."

Each painting she will show in the Tallahassee Watercolor Society's Annual Brush Strokes Exhibition hopes to give attendees a different perspective on a variety of wild creatures. Allen's favorite is "Between Legs," which will be on display through Nov. 13, in the City Hall Art Gallery.

The painting places the viewer quite literally at ground level and in between legs and hooves, with its focus on one grazing zebra's bluish muzzle. Using the full range of her palette, Allen's zebras are navy blue and auburn color, hitting on pinks, yellows, and blues, rather than blacks and whites. Though she's only recently begun painting with watercolors, Allen enjoys the many challenges of the medium.

"Sometimes I paint the same composition three times before I'm happy with it," admits Allen. "I don't feel like I'm wasting my time because each time I'm learning something new. The more you look at it the better, and the more opportunity you have to become better at it."

Allen was always practicing her craft while growing up in her hometown of West Palm Beach. She recalls taking long bike rides from her home to the Palm Beach inlet, frequently with her sketchbook in hand. Her mother, who also had an affinity for drawing, continually supported Allen's pursuits.

"She would let me draw her no matter how many times I made her look like George Washington," laughs Allen. "She was always my biggest cheerleader."

Allen attended Florida State University for both her BFA and MFA degrees in art. While in college, she preferred making sizeable and vivid acrylic pieces with imagined jungle landscapes and fabricated flora and fauna. Henry Rousseau was a major influence on her work, and she sought to tell a story with each painting. Her connection to the outdoors during this time only strengthened, sometimes resulting in trips with classmates to the Macley Gardens to sketch and paint.

Once she graduated, however, her career steered her towards full-time work in the technology field, and Allen didn't pick up another paintbrush for nearly 40 years. Now that she's retired, Allen is grateful for the opportunity to indulge her artistic side and decided to leave acrylics behind. She's focused now on



Sherry Allen's favorite, "Between Legs," will be on display through Nov. 13 in the City Hall Art Gallery. SHERRY ALLEN

perfecting her watercolor work and enjoy the camaraderie of fAWS and the classes she takes at the Tallahassee Senior Center.

"I have a lot of information about composition and color and how to look at art from school, but watercolor technique is a whole different thing," says Allen. "The challenge in watercolor is to control the water. If you have too much water or an unequal amount when it touches you could end up with a big bloom. Or if it's not dry before you apply the next color you can make this unattractive muddy area. Learning about the colors and what works well together is really rewarding when you get a good result."

Allen converted her formal dining room into a makeshift studio and tries to work nightly on her paintings. Her travels to the Lion Country Safari in West Palm Beach, the Alligator Farm in St. Augustine, St. Mark's Wildlife Preserve, and even as far as Costa Rica, all provide her with an array of animals to choose from. Once in the wild, she takes photos of her sub-

ject matter on a vivid camera setting to exaggerate the light and colors, then edits them further with filters and crops the images on her iPad before taking to the canvas.

"I'm always looking for places to go where animals will be so that I can get close enough to take pictures," says Allen, who has her sights set on the Galapagos next year.

Workshops from award-winning watercolorists Anne Abbott and Suzanna Winton have also influenced Allen's approach to the technique. Fellow critiques from her peers have encouraged her to use darker values as she has a proclivity for going towards lighter colors, and even though Allen feels new to the medium, she appreciates the chance to watch more experienced watercolorists in the society at work.

Thus far, Allen has been a part of two Tri-State Watercolor Exhibitions, as well as last year's Brush Strokes Exhibition. She's excited to show more work this year with her other painting in the exhibition, "Bird's Eye View."

IF YOU GO

What: Tallahassee Watercolor Society's Annual Brush Strokes Exhibition
When: Opening Reception 6-7:30 p.m., Thursday, Sept. 28. Exhibit on display 9 a.m.-5 p.m., Monday-Friday through Nov. 13
Where: City Hall Art Gallery, 300 South Adams St.
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information, visit <http://cooca.tallahasseearts.org/art-in-public-places/city-hall-gallery> or call 850-224-2500.



The work takes a closer look at four rhinos, a normally dull, gray bird that she has transformed into bright blues and purples.

"What's most interesting to me is the eyes of the birds," says Allen. "They're so unusual with these huge eyelashes. I like the animals that have a lot going on. They're more fun to paint."

With over 50 paintings being shown in this COCA curated exhibition, and the opening reception on Sept. 28, Allen hopes visitors to the gallery will be able to experience her animals with new eyes. As for her relationship with art, she's not slowing down anytime soon.

"My motto has always been to be persistent," remarks Allen. "If you want to do something, you may not be successful the first time you do it. But, if you really care about something, keep doing it."

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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COMMON MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES

Are you or a loved one considering a move to a senior community in the future? Last month we debunked a couple of myths, and here are a few more common myths associated with senior communities.

Myth #3: I currently live on my own and I am independent. I don't need to start searching for a senior community yet.
Reality: Often individuals believe that the right time to start looking for a senior community is once they can no longer take care of themselves at home. However, seniors in good health should plan ahead and start their research early so they have the knowledge to make a decision when the time comes to move to a senior community. Senior communities offer many opportunities for engagement to enhance the lives (physically and emotionally) of their residents. By putting off your search, seniors and their loved ones can then be strained to make decisions under a stressful situation. In addition, they are missing out on potential opportunities to enjoy the benefits of a senior community while they are still able to do so.

Myth #4: I won't be happy living in a senior community.
Reality: The Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA) recently conducted a survey of 500 seniors living in assisted living communities and found widespread satisfaction for almost every aspect of life in their communities. 94% of assisted living residents say they are satisfied with their overall quality of life in their assisted living community.

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