



Revelations Of An Artist

BY DEB MITCHELL • PHOTOS BY JOE MARTIN

RUTH AVA LYONS BLENDS A PASSION FOR ART WITH A NEED TO REVEAL

Ruth Ava Lyons isn't one for letting life pass her by. This professional artist has a Master of Fine Arts degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art, and an extensive résumé brimming with grants, awards,

and residencies. She is a prolific artist, perpetually creating highly sought-after landscape paintings. As if all of this weren't enough, she also surfs, practices archery, is learning to play the cello, and just received her scuba-diving certification.

"I just don't want to miss anything!" Lyons says.

Lyons, a Gemini, fits the notion of the juxtaposed celestial twin: solitary yet social; artistic yet business-minded; introspective but magnanimous. Even her paintings are dichotomous, blending light and shadow, graphic and obscured, blooming and decaying, simple and sophisticated. As an in-the-moment creative thinker and a savvy businesswoman, Lyons has somehow struck a balance between success and happiness.

"I had to make a choice," says the petite mother of a 22-year-old daughter and 16-year-old son, "between catapulting myself into the fine art world in a big, big way, or keeping my world small but more varied. I chose the latter."

paintings, birthing them from somewhere deep within. She creates her paintings using a glazing technique in which she adds layers of paint and, at times, takes layers away, in order to "bring up the light from beneath."

"The density of our struggles as human beings is very poignant for me," she says. "I'm trying to figure out what's in there — in life and in painting — and to pull it all out. For me, painting is the 'CSI' of art forms; it's a forensic activity."

As she creates, Lyons embeds prayers within the layers of paint. She has developed a script she calls "Ruthavian," which is inspired by the beauty and timely relevance of Chinese and Arabic script, mixed with a dash of shorthand (her mother was a medical transcriptionist), and finished off with her own lines and curves. Lyons



RUTH AVA LYONS WANTS HER ARTWORK TO OFFER VIEWERS A PORTAL INTO THE UNSEEN.

Predestined To Paint

Lyons' studio in the heart of NoDa — which since the mid-1980s has served as one of Charlotte's most interesting, artsy microcosms — is simple and spare. A construction paper heart proclaiming "I Love You!" hangs by the door. Old, narrow plank flooring is revealed under peeling paint. A simple work table holds industrial-sized tomato cans filled with brushes; smaller cans holding paint circle the room's perimeter. Current artwork that Lyons is prepping for an autumn show at Charlotte's Hidell Brooks Gallery adorns the walls, while older canvases of all sizes lean in stacks.

Lyons considers her studio highly private, even sacred. Painting, she says, is her predestination, her compulsion, and her very breath. In her studio, she labors over her

imbues the characters with spiritual meaning, praying for whatever is important to her that day — the world at large, Charlotte, individual friends, or perhaps a specific need.

Lyons wants to draw viewers into each scene, requiring her to "fight at all times the two-dimensional limits of painting."

"I want the viewer to walk into the painting and get lost," she says. "It's a portal. I want you to see the unseen."

Her advice to anyone approaching a piece of art for the first time? "Let go," she says. "It's like walking into a party where you don't know anyone ... just accept it for what it is. Art isn't telling you you're not smart enough or pretty enough. Just be in the moment. Who knows? You might have an epiphany!" >



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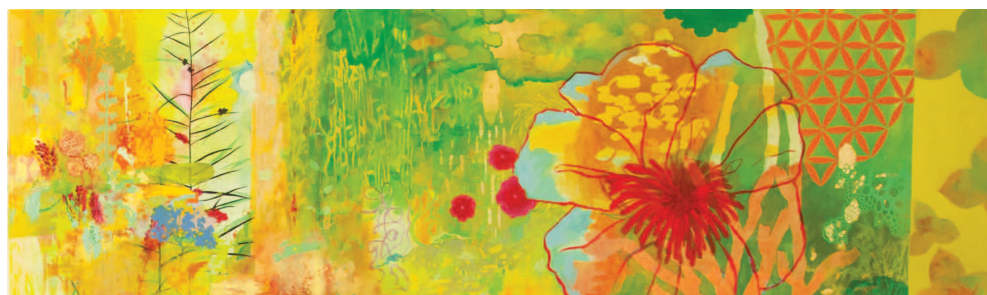
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RUTH AVA LYONS' WORK OFFERS A MYSTICAL QUALITY, DUE IN PART TO HER GLAZING TECHNIQUE, IN WHICH SHE ADDS AND REMOVES LAYERS OF PAINT. SHE CONSIDERS PAINTING A "FORENSIC ACTIVITY."

Revival Of The Fittest

As a premiere artist in Charlotte, Lyons' artwork graces numerous public and corporate buildings, as well as several public art institutions, including the Charlotte Convention Center, and an upcoming project for the Charlotte Area Transit Authority. But perhaps Lyons' greatest local contribution is her role in establishing the historic arts district known as NoDa.

Lyons and her partner, renowned sculptor Paul Sires, unwittingly initiated a revival of the area — located two miles north of uptown at North Davidson and 36th Street — when they opened a studio there in the early 1980s. The area had once been a thriving powerhouse of activity due to the N.C. Textile Industry, but after the last mill closed in 1975, the area became an abandoned city, of sorts — one that offered a boon of affordable studio space for "starving artists."

With less of a plan for reviving the area and more of a desire to surround themselves with other creative people, Lyons and Sires rallied others to move their studios and galleries into the neighborhood. They bought and refurbished real estate in the area and leased space, thereby paving the path toward the transformation of the area into an arts district.

Lyons opened the Center Of The Earth Gallery in NoDa in 1986. The gallery featured the works of numerous artists, as well as her own paintings. Before long, other galleries, shops, and eclectic restaurants rode the wave Lyons and Sires began. Weekly gallery crawls were introduced, and before long other special events steadily drew Charlotteans and tourists alike to the area.

The tide has turned, however, for NoDa. The declining economy and a struggling arts community have forced recent clos-

ings of a few NoDa galleries. Lyons, who closed her own gallery in 2010 for personal reasons, admits she is concerned for the future of NoDa. She urges Charlotteans to take steps to make a difference for NoDa — and the art community, in general.

"There is a nice community here for the arts, but there needs to be more involvement," she says. "Find something in the arts that you can get your hands in. Check out classes for you or your kids; visit open studios to see the artists firsthand; take advantage of events at galleries and museums."

These days, Lyons is busy building her consulting business, Lyons Fine Art Consulting, offering advice to corporate and residential clients about purchasing site-specific art pieces. She maintains the display space she still holds in NoDa — known as The Window on NoDa, which features the works of a different artist each month. In addition to painting, she also travels nationally and internationally to shows and teaching engagements. Then there's the surfing, and the cello lessons, and the search to find the deeper meaning in life. In short, Lyons is constantly working to balance her time in and out of her studio.

The artist offers the following advice to others, whether or not they consider themselves artistic individuals. "Take risks," she says. "You'll be better for it. Take that first step in a 1,000 step journey." **TCW**

ToLearnMore

Ruth Ava Lyons has an upcoming show Nov. 4 through Dec. 23 at Hidell Brooks Gallery; visit hidellbrooks.com for information. View Lyons' work at ruthavalions.com; or to learn about her consulting business, visit centeroftheearth.com.

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