

Capturing What's 'Round Here

Written by Mindy Lucas

Tuesday, 03 September 2019 10:25



Work of longtime Beaufort artist Mary Segars will be subject of new show

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Mary Segars has been busy lately.

The Beaufort painter has been flooded with commissions for everything from landscapes to portraits, and she also has a new show opening this month.

For an artist, it's a good problem to have – to be popular and appreciated in one's time. Or to, well, just be busy.

"I am disappointed that I don't have more new stuff for the show," she said by phone recently. "But I've just been so busy with commissions this year."

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Setting aside Segars' desire for "new stuff," what's impressive is the 63-year-old artist has come into her own over the past 15 years or so with a distinctive style that plays off light and shadow.



Case in point: she's had 11 of her own shows, has participated in a number of juried exhibits and festivals, and has won numerous awards including Best in Show at the 2015 Piccolo Spoleto Outdoor Festival for her body of work.

In addition, she's produced three large pieces of public art in Beaufort – two murals and a mosaic – and was chosen in 2015 to have one of her pieces displayed on a nearby billboard as part of the ArtPop program.

But what may be even more remarkable is that Segars, who is entirely self taught, didn't start painting seriously until her early 40s.

"What I call my beginning of painting (is when) I picked up a paint brush in about 1998," she said.

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Early Life

Born Mary Grayson in Blacksburg, Virginia, Segars grew up in a family that leaned more toward the sciences. Her father was an entomologist and her mother, who stayed at home with the children, was a part-time accountant.



“There was a lot of science and math in my family, so I came out of nowhere,” she said, laughing.

The family also enjoyed camping, getting outdoors and exploring nature together. As a child, Segars discovered a love for things like herpetology, botany and entomology at the nature camps.

Though Segars was more of “a science person” in high school, she began dabbling in portraiture after the school’s basketball coach put out a call for someone who could paint the team’s players.

Segars answered the call and produced pastels of all 15 of the players who got to take their portraits home. She was paid a total of \$25 for the assignment, something Segars had not expected.

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"I was in heaven, because I wasn't expecting to get paid anything," she said.

Over the next 10 years or so, Segars would go on to paint hundreds of portraits, stepping up



her fee to \$100 per painting. It was during this time she found she was particularly drawn to faces.

"I'm not sure why that is," she said. "I started drawing with a sketch pad when I was seven. I used to draw in church a lot and what I drew was faces."

After high school, Segars went on to study biology at William & Mary in Virginia, then became a research technician at the University of Georgia where she met her husband, Al. A longtime program manager for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources and popular area speaker, Al Segars was studying to become a veterinarian at the time.

The two married in 1983, raised three boys and eventually moved to the Lowcountry. Naturally, sketching faces and taking commissions got put on the backburner a bit.

However, a couple of years after moving to Beaufort, Segars began dabbling in art again – this time experimenting with scratchboard, or a type of engraving. She was particularly drawn to its precision and enjoyed using the medium to create animals, particularly their hair, feathers

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and fur.

And even though oil painting had never really been on her radar, she also started experimenting with oils.

“To me they were dark and dreary,” she said.

Nonetheless, Segars picked up a book at the library on color mixing and found she liked the color and consistency that oil offered. She began working almost exclusively in the medium, jumping in with both feet.

“Who jumps straight into portraits?” she said, laughing. “But in my mind (painting) wasn’t something I had to learn. I just found it fascinating.”

Over the next two decades she would continue to refine her style, which she describes as representational though not highly detailed.

“I have had people to say it’s more impressionistic, but I don’t know,” she said, adding that it’s definitely not meant to be photo realism or even heightened realism. “I don’t like to see every leaf or every blade of grass, but when you look at my paintings you know what it’s supposed to be.”

Looking for the Light

For her upcoming show, ‘Round Here, Segars wanted a simple name to describe the straightforward subject matter of the collection.

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