

Portraits of An Artist

by Jacqueline M. Duda



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEBRA HALPRIN

Debra Halprin

Silver Spring painter Debra Halprin's award-winning portraits have been featured in prestigious juried exhibits, including the Philadelphia Watercolor Society's International Exhibition and the Baltimore Watercolor Society's MidAtlantic Show. Her portrait, "Little Miss Molly," (Halprin's daughter) was accepted into "The Human Form," the Touchstone Gallery's Regional Juried Exhibit, and was awarded second place by Dr. Anne Goodyear, assistant curator at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., a gallery where Halprin would love to show someday.

InSight: *Did you always paint portraits?*

Halprin: I started with landscapes and still lifes. One day I tried a portrait and someone saw it and commissioned me to do another. I got so busy painting portraits; it's all I've been doing lately—commissioned work. I work for some Realtors as well. When they sell a house they commission me to paint the home so they can give the painting to the owners as a memento. My inspiration, besides my grandmother, is Andy Warhol. I love the colors he uses. I don't paint over photographs. Mine are sketched using photographs only as a reference tool. Most clients want me to just stick with the photograph, a more traditional look, but every once in a while I get to experiment with color.

InSight: *So there's an art gene in your family, via your grandmother?*

Halprin: I lived with my grandparents in New Jersey when I was very young. My grandmother, Ceil Grayer, was a well-known local artist and an art teacher. When I was five, I sat in on her classes. I always loved art and my grandmother would do all these fabulous projects with me. We colored Easter eggs together and did block prints. I painted a vase of flowers and



"Morning at Monet's"

she thought it was wonderful. She mounted and framed the painting and it hangs on my wall till this day.

InSight: *And you've been painting ever since?*

Halprin: Not really. I was a Spanish language and literature major and an education major in college. I taught for about a year and then I hopped over to pharmaceuticals. I was a rep for about 10 years. It was very lucrative, but not my thing. From there, I opened my

own business as an electrologist for a while before I got married. That was when I became an artist, when I could finally afford it.

InSight: *Is it difficult to create well-defined lines and facial features in watercolor?*

Halprin: You need to know the wetness of the paper and how fast the paper dries. That's the most important thing. For some looks, you want lost lines and edges. It's really about knowing how

much moisture is in the paper and how much water you want to put into the paint. It takes experience, and trial and error. Usually, I sketch the person first. For children, who typically won't sit for very long, I use reference photos and do the sketch from the photograph. I sometimes enhance the drawing a bit. I leave a lot of pencil lines, but not in the white areas. I think it's interesting. It's more exciting to the eye to give the brain something to fill in by looking at a painting and seeing

Artists Among Us



"Bethesda Community Store"



"Little Miss Molly"

that not all the lines are there. And then I just add layers of color.

InSight: *Lots of colors?*

Halprin: I always start with yellow. Then I blot out a little bit for the eyes and the teeth. The yellow base gives the portrait a glow. Sometimes, I paint all the clothing first and then tackle the skin tones. That's the most difficult part of working with colors: to get all the skin tones and the facial nuances right, a little shadow here, a little dimple there. That's what makes the portraits unique. You have to put on layer after layer and every little nuance counts. A slight adjustment can show contour and edges. And a little shows a lot. But it's so exciting to create something from scratch.

Halprin's work can be viewed online at: www.halprinart.com. Contact the artist at debra@halprinart.com or 301-260-9701.

Debra Halprin's paintings will be on exhibit at the Montgomery Art Association's Labor Day Weekend Paint the Town Art Show 2008 at the Kensington Armory on Mitchell Street, from Saturday August 30th to Monday September 1st. Hundreds of Montgomery County artists will exhibit artwork that represents Kensington.