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LEAVING A MARK





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PAINTER DEBORAH GOOCH'S
STYLE DEFIES CATEGORY, BUT IT'S
ALL ABOUT THE STORYTELLING

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JARED BLAIS

Many artists find a preferred mode of expressing their work and stick to it. Not so with Deborah Gooch, who straddles abstraction and realism with ease and often uses both styles in one painting. She describes her work as impulsive with a strong sense of narrative. She also calls it “all over the place.” And she seems to be thriving in that figurative place.

In the process of painting, Deborah often starts with one mode on the first layer and adds the other for the finished work. “It’s liberating for me to begin with an initial paint layer that I must fight against to achieve my final goal. It frees me to follow my intuition and keeps me open to the

Deborah, a well known and respected artist and educator on the local art scene, stresses the importance of drawing. “You can’t go directly to abstract painting without learning how to draw.”

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contributions of fate.”

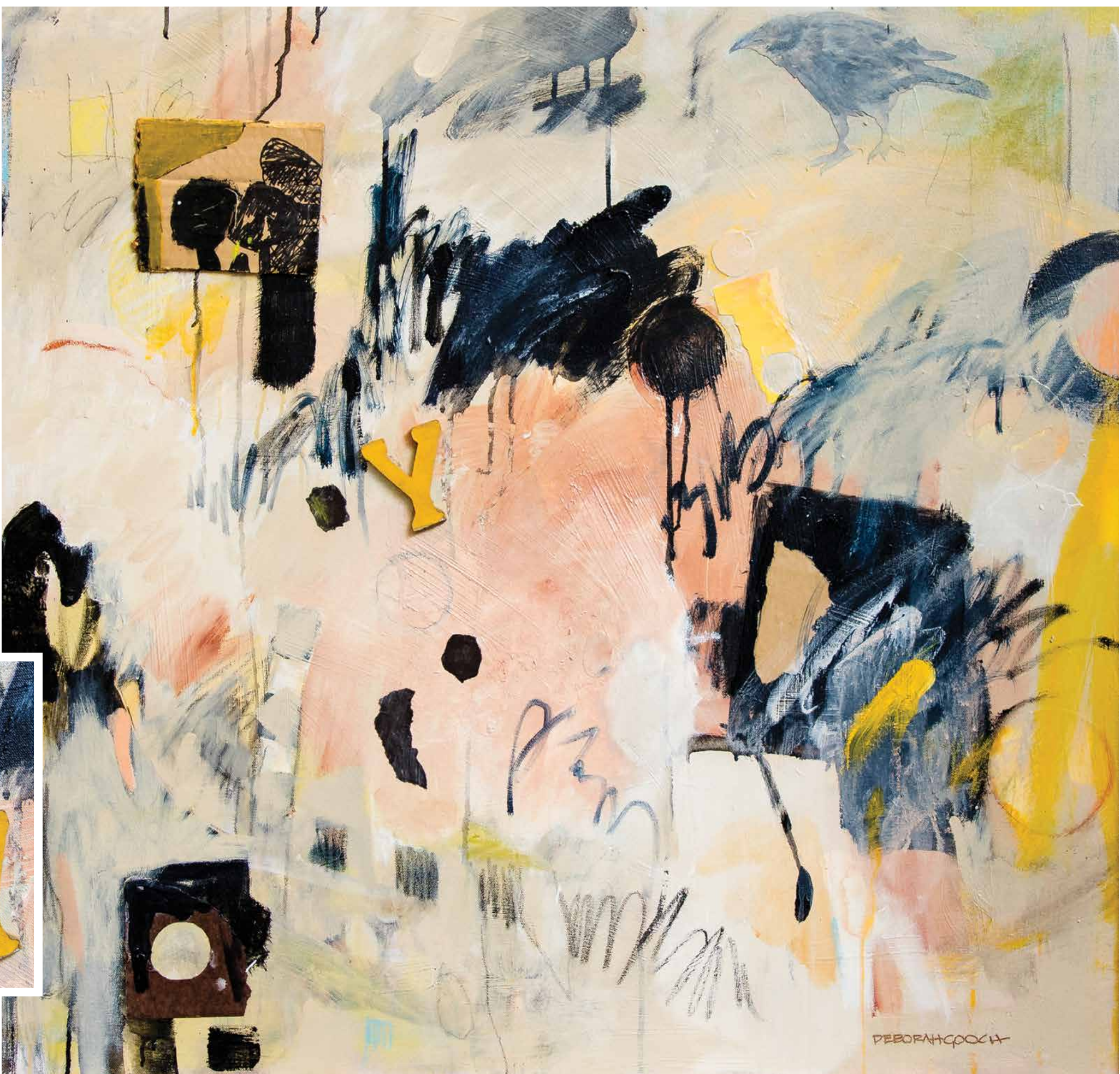
Painting with a sense of narrative is the process of constructing a painting like telling a story, she says. “The paintings tend to tell me a direction. I just have to listen and pay attention. That’s why many of my paintings have so many things in them.” She points to a painting in the corner of her studio as an example of this.

“Iris’ started as a figurative piece, actually. I did it at the end of a workshop I taught years ago. I had a photograph of a woman with two kids on a swing, and I decided to paint them. I had no idea what else I was going to put on the painting at that time. I let things evolve. I thought, wouldn’t that look good with a donkey thrown in? And then I painted the irises in the background and called the work ‘Iris’ because she looked like that could be her name. I love that painting.”

Deborah is a well-known and respected artist and educator on the local art scene. She has exhibited widely, and her paintings have been collected nationally.

She opened her studio on 7th Avenue near downtown Vero Beach two years ago when her art started taking over her home. Indeed, one room of the studio contains over 100 works of her art — most finished, but others, she may decide to add to or complete the story.

The studio was originally a paint store, and its window-lined



Painted in oils, this it is one of the first pieces that Deborah says she consciously started mixing realism and abstraction.



storefront facing west provides plenty of natural light for Deborah and her art students to work. Nine easels line the walls. “I think it’s important for artists to step back and look at their work from a distance, so I limit the classes to only seven at a time.”

Her students are intermediate or advanced in their skills, and her method of instruction could better be described as coaching than teaching.

“I am always telling the people in here to keep your shoulder loose and to paint with a big brush from the shoulder and make good gestural marks. You need to learn to make your marks. We all have marks that are going to come out, and I think my job is to study each artist and find out what direction he or she needs to take to become a more mature artist.”

She adds, “I throw things out at them to try to get them to keep their work contemporary. What I mean by that is at some point they need to eliminate some of the hard rules they learned in the first place. I want my students to break those rules. But you have to have an education to break them.”

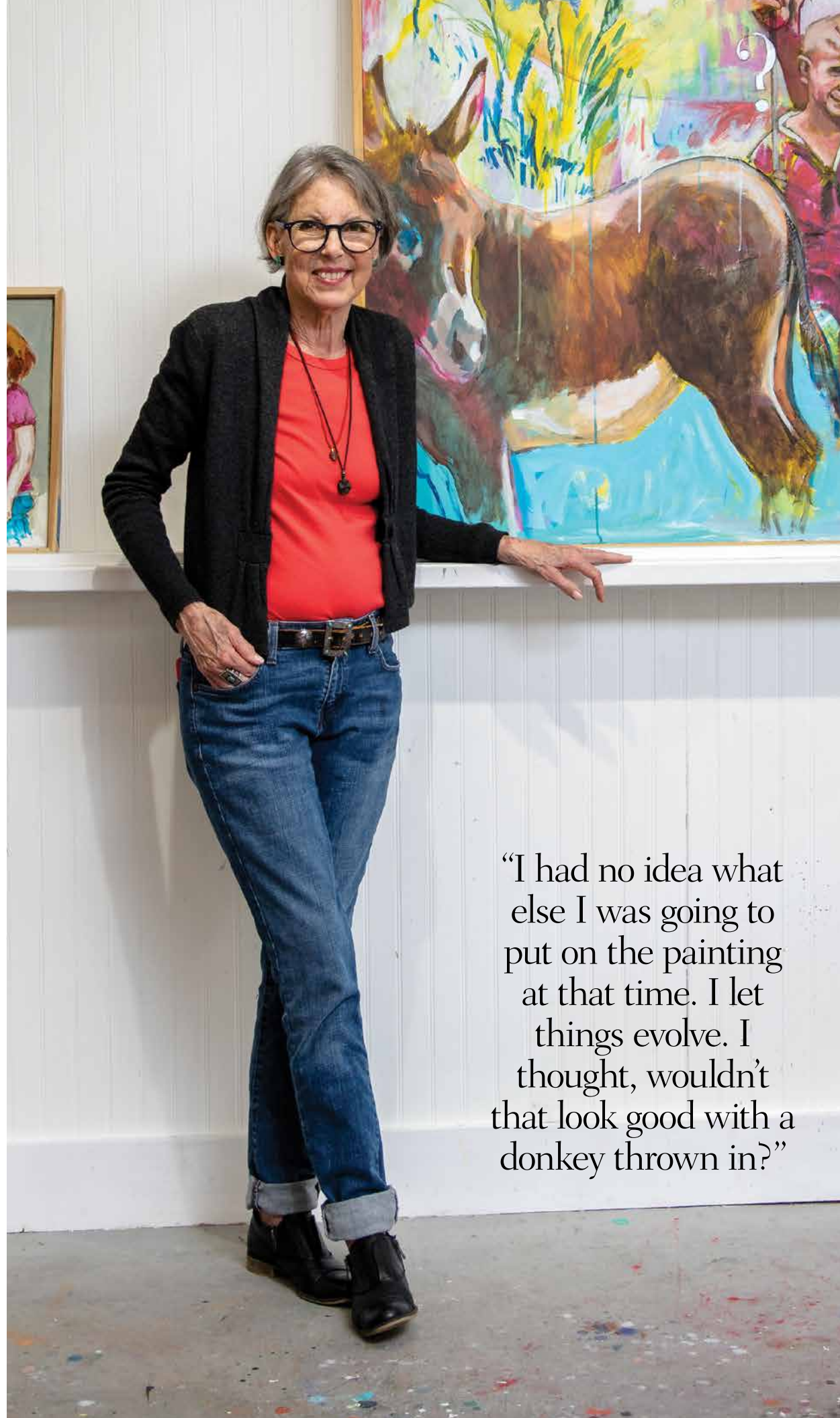
Deborah, who taught figure drawing and contemporary painting at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, stresses the



“I just love the joyful palette,” the artist says of this abstract work.

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Deborah painted irises in the background and called the work “Iris” because the woman looked like that could be her name.

importance of learning how to draw. “So many artists can’t draw. And that to me is the most important education you can have. You can’t go directly to abstract painting without learning how to draw.” Studying art and spending time in museums are also important. “You need an educated eye.”

She maintains a library, not only of art books but also photographs of objects, such as food and animals, that she and her students might paint someday.

“I don’t believe in trying to do something realistic from my mind. None of us can sit down and draw a grape or a lemon perfectly from memory, as many times as we have touched them. It should be correct if you are going to put it on a canvas. I am not a hyper realistic drawer or painter. I am more gestural. But I think it is important to have something to go by to get it right,” she says.

“Unless, of course, you are painting abstractedly.”

Abstract painting is a challenge, she admits. “It’s not easy to get it right because there are no limitations. You can do anything, and you can put anything down. When you are doing realism, there may be a photograph you are working from and it’s going to go on a certain size canvas. There are rules. In abstract painting there are no real rules. But it still must have all the elements of realism, such as depth, movement and composition, and the colors have to be pleasing.”

Deborah opened her studio as much for networking with other artists as for teaching — maybe more. “I always

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say artists can't work in a closet. We need input from other artists. We need a fresh eye. It's all part of growing and we owe it to ourselves to grow if we are going to be an artist. We have to keep pushing ourselves.”

Deborah comes from a family of artists who always encouraged her. She doodled and drew pictures as a child, and she remembers laboring over a drawing for a competition for Brownies when she was 7. “The drawing was of Black Beauty and all his pasture-mates, taken from the book. I cried over it, but my dad was there to help me, and he told me what I needed to do. I have always been that way, serious about art.” She went on to study art at the Maryland Institute College of Art where she majored in fine art and painting.

In the nearly four decades she has lived in Vero Beach, she has made her mark in other areas as well — some art related and others not. Work as a commercial artist brought Deborah to south Florida in the early 1980s. She attributes this effort to her ability to paint fast.

Her husband's work brought them to Vero Beach after previously working at their commercial design business in Tequesta.

For several years she and her husband, Jim, had an antique shop on Royal Palm Boulevard, featuring pre-1830s



Two paintings on display in Deborah's studio, located on 7th Avenue near downtown Vero Beach

“Art is a passion that, if you keep up, you can do forever.”



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This mixed media work depicts the artist's parents. “They were on a boat ride and had very recently gotten engaged. They look so young and in love.”



“Here I collaged vintage photos to a board to make an interesting painting surface. The photos also created problems I needed to address. I love the problem solving aspect of painting.”

American furniture. (They still deal in antiques but now they specialize in native American jewelry, which they learned to appreciate while spending time in Taos, New Mexico.) This led John Henry, then director of the Center for the Arts, to tap Deborah to establish the center's popular antique show, which she co-managed for five years with Henrietta McClellan.

Ten years ago she founded the art co-op Gallery 14 and served as its president for the first five years. And for over 25 years she and Jim owned and operated Winter Beach Farm, a seasonal horse-boarding facility. A separate cottage on the farm's 10 acres served as her studio.

Throughout all these ventures, she never stopped painting, except for a period last year. A brain tumor called a halt to practically everything, except her recovery. Blurred vision led to the discovery of the tumor, which was, fortunately, benign. An 11-hour surgery performed in Miami was followed by six weeks of radiation at the Scully Welsh Cancer Center at Indian River Medical Center.

Side effects of the radiation have caused some hearing

and peripheral vision loss. “I can still paint although my hand is a little shaky. So, I am now doing more realism to maintain my drawing skills.”

During her illness and recovery, her fellow artists stepped in to keep the studio operating. She particularly points to abstract expressionist painter Tim Sanchez, who taught the classes during her absence. “Tim was a big help and he still comes by and paints with me in the studio.”

She clearly relishes being with her artist friends and students, whom she believes make her a better painter.

“I am not someone who looks at art as a hobby. I take it very seriously. It is hard work and a commitment of time, energy and study. I am so lucky to have those kinds of people surrounding me. They work hard and want to learn more and want to progress.”

Art is a passion that, if you keep up, you can do forever, she says. She refers to a student who paints impressionistic landscapes. “He is wonderful. I make comments on his work, and he teaches me things, and this keeps our minds active and our abilities strong.” ☘