

REAL ESTATE

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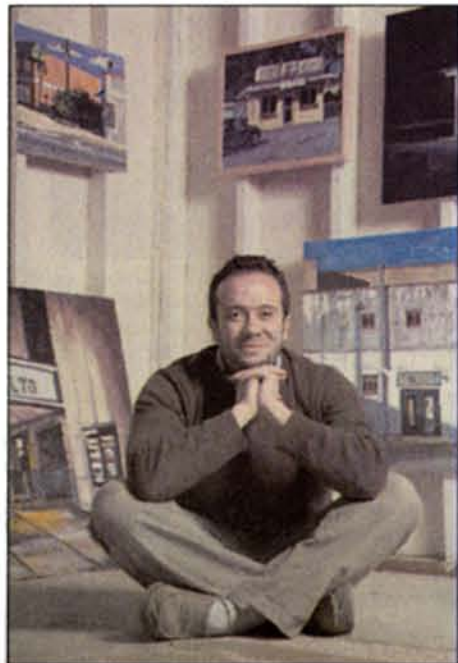
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Section C

The art of architecture

By Marimar McNaughton • Staff Writer

Beach architecture surrounds local artists with a sea of inspiration



Staff photo by Joshua Curry

Surrounded by recent paintings, local artist Ben Keys eyes Wrightsville Beach from his studio on Summer Rest Road.

For Ben Keys, 28, buildings are like people. "They have personalities," Keys said. Attracted by the geometry of buildings, Keys creates a three-dimensional illusion of volume, space and mass. He arrests the essence of light and shadow distilled into fields of color broken down into squares and angles in an abstract composition that, when complete, resembles a living, breathing structure.

"I love abstract art," Keys said. He began his career as a conceptual artist but switched gears at Chicago Art Institute when a professor took the entire class outdoors to paint.

"I didn't know what I was doing," Keys admitted, until his professor demonstrated, in one brush stroke, a grass lawn in shadow. From that point forward, he studied plein-air painting in Chicago and in Umbria, Italy.

"I came down here as a kid and always wanted to live here. It was like paradise, it was like living a dream," Keys said. "God works things out."

Two years ago, Keys was invited by his uncle, Wright Holman, to move to Wrightsville Beach to paint.

In between house portraits for his uncle and others, including commissions from the Harbor Island Garden Club for its annual house tour, Keys works in familiar Wrightsville Beach icons, like the Heide Trask Drawbridge, Roberts Grocery Store and Kohl's Frozen Custard. From his studio, which was once his grandmother's garage, Keys eyes Wrightsville Beach. "Art comes from life. I paint to share my love for painting, and the visual experience, to share with others."



Supplied renderings courtesy of Lois Watson

Lois Watson's meticulous architectural drawings are rendered from her Wilmington home office and frequently feature designs by Scott Sullivan, her brother, for national publications.

Like Keys, Lois Watson followed family to North Carolina. Her brother, Scott Sullivan, is a residential designer. When Sullivan needed architectural renderings to illustrate his designs, Watson picked up one of his old textbooks and schooled herself in the art of perspective drawings. That was 12 years ago. Since then, her meticulously detailed renderings have appeared in the pages of national magazines, though her clients find her by word-of-mouth.

The New Jersey native, who was offered a full scholarship to Pratt Institute of Design, turned it down to be married. Today, she and her husband of 30 years live in Wilmington. She enjoys textile art, flower pressings, acrylic and watercolor paintings, though her architectural renderings sometimes consume 8-10 hours a day. "I got into it because Scott was going out on his own," Watson said, adding, "I like to draw. It's very relaxing to me."

Another self-taught artist, specializing in house portraits, stumbled into her profession when her children gave her a set of watercolors for Mother's Day in 1992. With 12 tubes of pigment, Deborah Cavanaugh created a rash of paintings until, she said, "They left me alone."

It was in a transition period that she discovered her muse. "I was married for almost 20 years and I was divorcing. I wanted something of my own in the house," she said. So she reached beneath the bed to dust off those seminal watercolors and carried a few to the local frame shop. While there, the gallery and frame shop owner admired her work and offered to hang the paintings.

"I sold three the next week," Cavanaugh said. Six months later, after another artist dropped out, she was invited to showcase her work at Caffé Phoenix on Front Street. She produced 25 paintings in a month for that one-woman show. "I'm a very religious person, but I didn't 'get it' right away," she said, though she prayed for something to do so her children could be with her. An opportunity opened at Acme Art warehouse, where several other artists were already bringing their children to the studio. "It was a madhouse of children," she said. That was 1993. Now, Cavanaugh is her own LLC, churning out portraits of houses, churches and schools, painting originals for her line of prints and greeting cards.

"Almost everyone wants me to 'Deborah Cavanaugh' their house portrait. I punch the color, put more flowers in the yard. I put their family in the yard, their dreams in the yard, their past in the yard. I want my



Supplied images courtesy of Deborah Cavanaugh
Deborah Cavanaugh's house portraits spring to life with encouraging words and a bright palette, embellished with fanciful flowers and fish.

paintings to be a blessing," she said.

She paints the story of the home, embellishing the portrait with an encouraging message.

"As life goes on," she said, "I want the family to look at the painting and say, 'it was nice to be us.'"