

ON A RECENT COOL MORNING IN MARCH, I drove to Deborah Cavenaugh's studio to meet with her. There was no trouble finding it. At the end of a drab, lonely street, there was one house bedecked with a banner of painted flowers and a mailbox to match. Her former studio was destroyed in a fire, along with much of her work.

I rang the doorbell. No response. I waited a few minutes and rang it again. Still no response. The door was slightly ajar, so I gently eased it open and called out, "Deborah?"

She sat hunched over a large desk, fussing with her computer, having quite an empire to manage these days. According to her resume, she is represented in galleries from Maine to Florida, and in private collections in six foreign countries. In addition, she has been shown in numerous exhibitions.

She told me she had to finish some bookkeeping, so I told her to take her time, that I was in no hurry. I sat down on a well-used but comfortable sofa. There was no reading material in sight, so I tried to coax her two cats into joining me on the couch, but they were not interested, and sat coolly scrutinizing me from a distance.

I sat quietly with my thoughts and surveyed the shadowy interior of the house she employs as a studio. From my vantage point, all I could see were rooms filled with boxes and storage devices and saw nothing resembling a typical artist's studio. But at that point, I had no knowledge of her working methods. Her paintings in their gilded frames seemed to vibrate against the dim walls, like bold promises of an eternal spring.

Cavenaugh moved to Wilmington in 1992. She was born in Virginia, but considers herself a native of Washington, D.C., what has been called "The Murder Capital of the World." I wondered, in my habit of analyzing everyone and every thing, if growing up in such environs had any bearing on what some see as a need to present an almost Pollyanna-like view of the world. She would also have had easy access to some of the world's finest museums, which must have been a great source of inspiration to her.

I reminded myself I was not here to psychoanalyze anyone, only to get an interview. But then, as if by magic, the intensity and definite energy found in Deborah's presence seemed to flow toward me across the room. "I'm ready to talk," she announced. She must have gotten over her irritation with the computer; she sounded very jovial.

I gratefully leapt up with all my paraphernalia and joined her at the large desk, where she preferred to be seated. After only a few minutes into the interview, I realized that the carefully chosen words I had composed in the form of neatly typed questions were going to be utterly useless. I could not slow her down enough to gently lead her from one question to the next. So I tossed my pages aside, turned on my tape recorder and let her hold forth. After all, the most important component of an interview is a willingness to listen, and listen well.

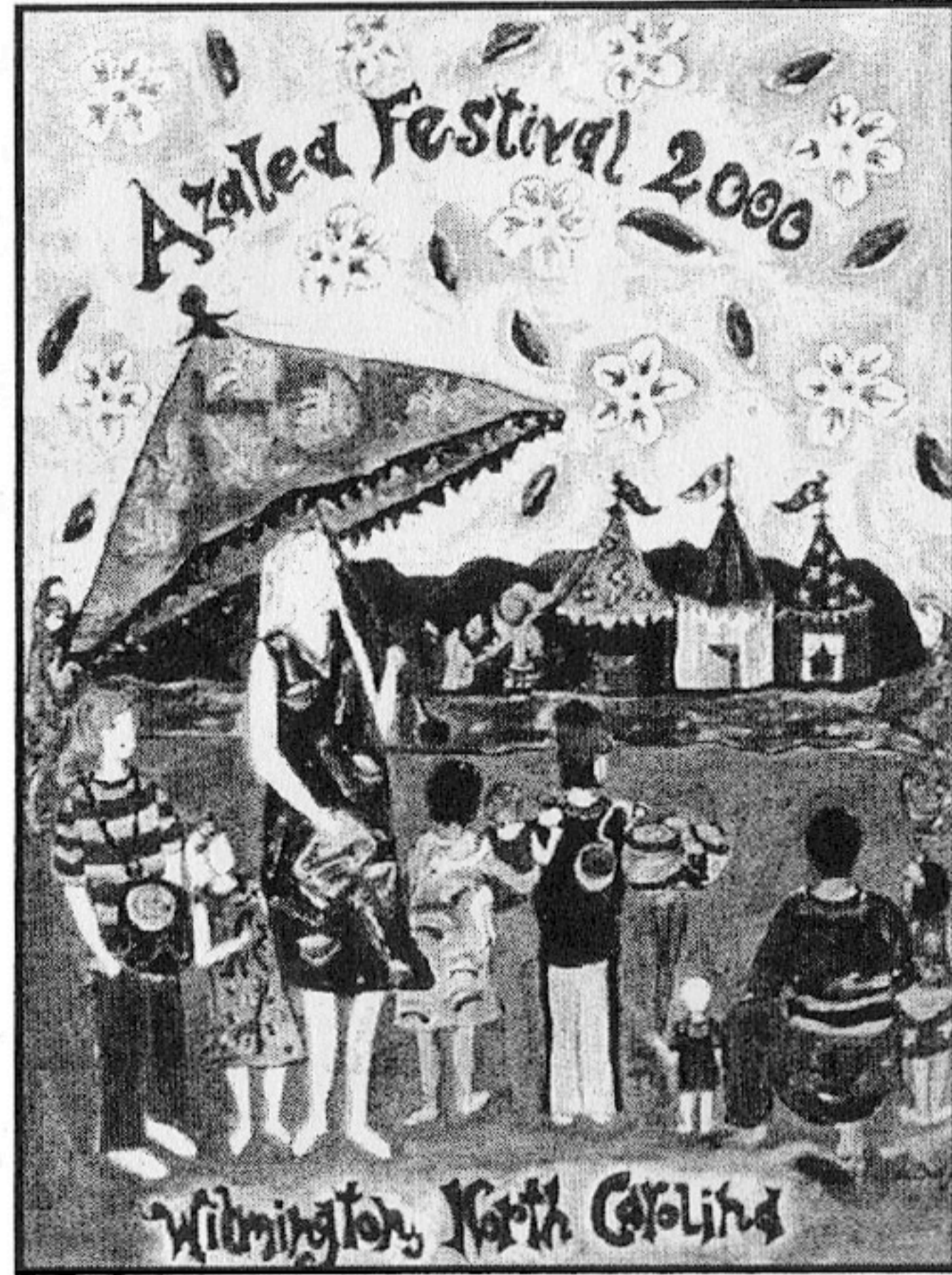
Deborah Cavenaugh speaks as she paints: freely, confidently, aggressively and gleefully, avoiding any unpleasant subject and pausing only for an occasional laugh or shallow breath. Her intensity is captivating. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation.

When did you first begin painting? In 1992, on Mother's Day, my children bought me a little set of watercolor paints. That's what I asked for. The first paintings that I made, and probably for the first two years after receiving the watercolors, I never drew on the paper. I was scared to draw because, you know, that's the first thing people say: "I wish I could be an artist, but I can't draw a straight line." I felt exactly the same way. That somehow my inability to draw a straight line would shut the door on my artistic endeavors.

One of the reasons I finally began to draw was I wanted to make more intricate paintings, add more complexities. ... In the beginning I just painted these sort of little vases of flowers, but I didn't know anything about being an artist. Everything I knew about being an artist I learned from the movies! Ha! That in the movies, they always do two things: One, they put the canvas or paper up on an easel or on the wall, and two, they always have music on. So this was the extent of my preparation!

But what I didn't know was that watercolors were meant to be done on a flat surface, you're not supposed to tape the

Wilmington artist DEBORAH CAVENAUGH At Home With Herself by Mary Elizabeth Owens



Popular local artist Deborah Cavenaugh painted this year's official Azalea Festival poster.

paper to the wall. I got my watercolors out and started painting and it started running and dripping, and so I learned to paint really aggressively, really fast, and I painted with very stiff brushes, not designed to hold much water (so they wouldn't drip) and this actually became a very integral part of developing my own style. I couldn't let the paint pool, I couldn't paint in thin layers, or washes, as they are called, because they'd just run down the paper, and I still paint with my paper "up" (on the wall); that's my style. I paint with hard lines, which is not traditionally the way to use watercolor. I learned all I know about painting from the movies! So I don't do anything quite right!

We all learn things "not quite right" from the movies! So in 1992, I got divorced and moved to Wilmington. In 1993, I took a few pieces of my art to a gallery for framing, and I was embarrassed to tell anyone I had done them. The gallery owner asked me if I had any more of the paintings, and I said I did. She asked me where they were hanging and I said, "Right now, they're hanging under my bed!" She asked me to go get them and put me under contract that day. I sold three of them that week, but I didn't take that seriously; I didn't see myself as an artist.

Then I got a call from the Caffé Phoenix; someone had seen my stuff in this gallery and asked me to do a show there. But the trick was it had to go up in a month—a 25-piece show. So I had my little set of student paints and

couple of pieces of paper and one brush—ha, that's all I had. I said, "OK, I'll do the show," and I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. It was crazy making! I got no sleep; I had three weeks to do all these paintings and get them framed! But I did it! I never got out of my nightgown for a month, you know, I was just stumbling around the house, I had paper taped up everywhere and I was just painting and painting and painting. There must have been something inside me that knew it was the right thing to do.

I waited a couple of weeks before I went to see the show; it was just too much for me. The day I went in there, someone said to me, "Why don't you think about doing this

full time? Why don't you get a studio?" You know, questions like that, and all of a sudden it just hit me. Why not? I'd have a way to raise my children without having to put them in day care, work 12 hours a day, I was living off what I'd gotten out of my marriage. So all these ideas were going through my head, my kids were 9 and 6 and I decided to give myself a year. I figured, I don't know how to be an artist, but I did know how to be a good worker, how to keep commitments, always do your best. So I worked really hard, as I still do, and at the end of the year I had a place to show my work and I had steadily earned money and I'd had my kids with me every single day.

My kids still help out at the studio—it's as much a part of our family as our home is. My children gave me something that moved the whole process forward. Even now, a lot of what I paint about is what's authentically "you." I am a part of many people's reality—I mean, I'm a mother, I'm a divorced mother. Many of the things I'm concerned with, other people are going through those same things. The more authentically I can express it, (the more) people can have a conversation with me through my art.

It's kind of interesting the way things worked out for me. I look at my hands and I think, "How did you learn to do that?" How did I wake up one morning and begin to know? It's very fascinating to me. I mean, I'm like a child and I'll say, "Look! Momma can paint a cow!" It's just a lovely thing to have had happened. If I hadn't believed in God before, I believe in Him now. If I didn't believe in miracles before, I do now! So March 1, it was like six years since I took that studio. 1994.

In the beginning, what fed your desire to paint? Were you inspired by any particular artist? Your early work bears some resemblance to Matisse. I know you hear that all the time. No, I wasn't really inspired by any artists. I didn't know really anything about artists. Matisse, Matisse, Matisse, I get a lot of that. When I began to learn about other artists, I forbade myself to look at any Matisse. I also struggled with the idea of whether or not to study art. In my 20s, I took a couple of drawing classes—you know, draw the cone, draw the sphere—and I couldn't get past it. So I tried not to look at other artists' work, not to study art until I felt confident with my own style, which was emerging.

I paint very spontaneously, very intuitively. I've never had anyone say, "No, no, no! That's not valid." As far as I know, everything is valid! In my work, I'm totally free; if I can make the paint do it, I do it. I don't know what you're supposed to do, and that's a good thing for me.

In other words, for you, taking art classes could have proven to be a liability and not an asset. That's right. And in the classes, I don't even count those, because I never did the first thing. What the tradition of the art lesson tells you, if you can't draw the sphere, the cone, whatever, don't go any further. One of the reasons people compare me to Matisse is because I paint real flat and I don't worry about dimensions and perspective and all that. I don't have to worry about it. I don't care if the chair is too small, I don't care if it looks like the back legs are in the front, it doesn't affect me. I just care if you can't tell it's a chair.

I want to communicate through my work, I want people to understand what I've done. I want the essence of the chair, the essence of the person, the essence of the flower, but beyond that, it doesn't matter too much to me.

Some people have said that your work defies classification, that it's a phenomenon in and of itself, much like the way the work of Minnie Evans was. Do you agree? I understand the statement, and I feel like it's a real compliment to be put in the same sentence with her. I honestly feel like it's something coming from God. When I paint, it's coming from my imagination. I believe that every painting that comes through me, comes through me for someone. When someone buys it, it won't be because it looks good over their couch, or because they heard they should. They may have remembered being a child and their cousin passed away and they've always thought of this one day, or because they love their children,

because that, somehow, they recognized something human in it. So that now I think that in some way, every painting I make belongs to someone.

What a wonderful idea. And then the ones I don't sell, that I like the best, belong to me! Ha! So, back to Minnie Evans, I know that she felt driven to paint, she was not out to create a logical, planned painting. It was a painting that happened. And that's how my paintings are. I don't second guess my intuitive process, ever. In some cockamamie way, it somehow comes together as a cohesive construction.

You have taken a really radical approach to painting. You know, in Minnie Evans' work, there was such evidence of a mysterious, yet innocent wisdom and a rich inner or spiritual life. You often incorporate such insight or beliefs into your own work, including the use of written phrases. Where do these phrases come from?

My paintings are like my journal, except I'm painting it instead of writing it. From the beginning, I just painted what was coming through, what I felt like painting. It's like freewriting. So I had a show and the reason I asked my children to buy me paints—it was back when I was pregnant with my son and I was reading a "beach novel"—there was a character in it who passes away, and she is a mother, a good mother, and the kids are cleaning up the house. In the laundry room, they find these dozen or so canvases. And they say, "Didn't Mom say she used to paint?" Well, that just tore me up, you know, in my pregnant state. They didn't even know who she was, and she had this whole deep, secret life going on. The paintings were of women, ordinary women, doing ordinary things. Immediately, these visions came into my head: These women, you know, at the clothes line, at the stove, just doing what is so ordinary, yet so profound. I couldn't get those images out of my head, and I thought, "There is no way I can paint those paintings. I don't have the skill, I can't draw! How am I going to do it?"

So a couple of years went by, about 1996, I guess it was, there was a gallery here called Bauhaus. They offered me a show and suggested there must be something new that I wanted to try. And immediately, it came into my mind about these women. So I set out to do them. I did them first in their homes, where they lived, terribly encumbered by their responsibilities and by their maintenance duties. Which is what a home is really: Everyone saying, hey, look at me, fix this, do this, etc. At this same time, someone had asked me to do a beach painting, which I had not done. I'd never painted the outdoors.

I agreed to try it and I decide to put a woman in the painting. I didn't know what to do with her face, so I bent her over with her hair hanging down over it, she's rummaging through a basket, and I called the painting, "I'm living in my own world." And immediately I thought I will put these women in my head on the beach, where everything seems free and possible. I did 12 paintings. Women hanging out clothes, women in the bath—big paintings—and they're out on the beach and I write on every one of them, a bold step. And I decide that I would write what I was really thinking, about how beautiful and profound it is to be a woman, to be a mother, to be a wife, how in the things we disregard lie the deepest, most profound sense of accomplishment in our lives. I mean, when I die, what will make me feel my life has been successful? If I could say, "My children are happy," I would feel like, OK, I've done it, my life has been successful. Every little moment of love you give to them is so profound. It's not profound in just a "today" way, it's in the great ripple of life. That love, that attention you give them will be profound in the way it ripples out all around you.

What it did for my work is that it elevated the authenticity of it. It also gave me my own style, which I've come to learn is a very important thing for me as an artist. You have your own voice, just like in writing you have your own voice. I think that is probably the most important gift that I was given: That I can paint in a unique way. Everyone is trying to be heard, and that's what it is. The response to that show was overwhelming. People I didn't even know were coming up to me and saying these words I painted made them cry, that

I should write more words so that people can carry them around, and I realized that these words I put on my paintings were really like the cap of my body of work. I try to make them positive, I try to make them turned into the light. It doesn't mean that I haven't had a difficult life, that I haven't suffered.

I don't want to remember myself by my downfalls, nor do I want it to be the defining thing about me. What I want to be the defining thing about me are the moments when I have prevailed, when I have come through something. Like when a soldier comes through battle, they get a medal. They're not the victim of the battle, they're the hero.

So this is why I write things into my paintings. Many people buy them for what they say.

You are so prolific, where does this incredible drive come from? You must have a mighty muse! Ha! You're right, I do. I believe it is just a gift coming from God to me. Because I trust the process of it, I can paint endlessly. I used to have this fear in the beginning. What will I do if I run out of this light? What if I run out of ideas? I still have so much I want to say, I have so much I have to give out. I'm just trusting what comes out. I'm not planning my conversation. I just open myself up and I just let my hands work!

Have you ever had any hesitation, anything akin to what writers call "writer's block"? Never. Never, ever, ever, have I been unable to work. Sometimes it is more arduous for me, simply because I'm a human being. Sometimes I'm tired, or sick. My sinuses—living in North Carolina—ha! But when I sit down to work, I'm in my own world. And I use music, too. Music really transports me. I have an extensive collection of music. Sometimes I listen to the same song over and over. It puts me in a certain place, it asks the questions. Again, what am I working on in my own life? It drives me.

One of my paintings is called "The Most Important Home Is The One We Carry Inside," and that just sums up. I have it out in a card now, but that just sums up what being a spiritual person is about. We have a home we carry inside, whatever you call it, whether you call it Buddha's garden, your soul, or whatever you carry around inside of you all the time. If that home is well-maintained, and well stocked, whatever happens to you, you have a place to go.

We discussed the process she went through to create the Azalea Festival poster. Her first design burned in the fire that destroyed her previous studio. I loved one statement she made: That "Wilmington is a town where anyone can grow up to be a princess!"

Tell me about the book you're working on. Well, let's see. I've got one book that I've illustrated. It's at the Viking Press right now. It looks like it's going to go, it's not completely tied up, but I think it will go. Then, I've got another one in progress. A woman here in Wilmington is writing some poetry, and I'm doing some work to go along with it. Then, today I'm going to actually work on a book of fiction with someone here in town, so writing is becoming more, well, it's too early to talk about it, but we start working on it today. The book agent I'm seeing today thinks I could have a great chance as a cover artist, so we're also talking about that.

I think it's very interesting how your development as an artist is going, and how you successfully combine your visual media with the written word. That has been an interest for me, personally, for a long time. I hope that my work comforts people. And the greatest joy for me, will be that in that house, in the house somewhere, hangs a work of my art. Sometimes they look at it, and when they look at it, because of the message, because of the colors I've chosen, because of what I've written, just for that little moment, there's a lift inside of them, because they feel comforted. And if I can do that, I'm fulfilled. I mean, what more can you ask for? e