

For Lawrenceville's Fay Sciarra, art and business are complementary



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N.J. ARTISTS

Not all artists are otherworldly and impractical, able to think of little else but “their work.” Take Lawrenceville’s Fay Sciarra, for instance.

At once artist, shop and gallery owner, wife and mother of a teenager, she’s also poised, articulate, savvy and stylish. She’s very much of this world, moving smoothly through her second career.

When Sciarra began to paint 15 years ago, it wasn’t for the usual reason — “I always wanted to be an artist.” Instead, she was following the suggestion her mother made before she died: that her daughter take up painting.



Born in New York City in the mid-50s, Sciarra had worked as a TV producer in San Francisco after majoring in TV/film at the University of Michigan. Then in just a few years, her life changed both personally and professionally: she married David Sciarra, Director of the Education Law Center, Newark, and switched careers.

Their son, Sam, now an accomplished high school junior, was an infant when his mother began to paint. Self-taught, she created work that quickly attracted buyers and galleries.

Jump ahead to March 2011. Sciarra sits in an antique French armchair, part of a room setting in the loft space of Hopewell’s popular Tomato Factory, a consortium of antique dealers. She’s surrounded by an artful jumble of antiques, mid-century modern furniture pieces, eclectic lighting and accessories . . . and her own art work.

“Umbrella,” the chic shop and gallery she and sister-in-law Linda Sciarra own and run, starts its third year next month. Though her artwork has been widely exhibited and the galleries representing her have ranged from Madison Avenue, Manhattan, to Canyon Road, Santa Fe, the idea of her own gallery began to have appeal a few years ago.

Having such a place would eliminate the need to market herself and her art – typically the least-loved activity for artists — and eliminate having to pay other galleries 50% of sale prices. It would also draw on Sciarra’s lifelong involvement with antiques and collectibles, as well as her connections in those fields.

So, just as her art has evolved from paintings on canvas to mixed media, sculptural pieces, collage and assemblages, her business has also evolved into a one-stop shop for designers and decorators that “eliminates the need to schlep to New York.”

Umbrella has given Sciarra “a revolving gallery of her art.” She says, “Much as I like my work in pristine white cube galleries too, I’ve had a lot of success showing it in a context, with furniture and accessories.” And being in an environment frequented by decorators also helps because they can be conduits for selling.

Curating the entire space, the partners also represent a small, hand-picked group of home furnishings dealers and designers, and sometimes select additional pieces for the inventory themselves. In a single word, the name “Umbrella” suggests what the business is: an umbrella for “a small group of creative people.” (The word “Décor” had to be added to their domain name, but it has proved an aid for search engines.)

Sciarra describes her art-business combination as a good marriage, with no threat of the business taking away from her work: “I’m inspired by being surrounded by beautiful objects. This is a haven of design and also a group of creative people. I get inspired by the things around me and by the hunt, by looking for things.”

Another plus: her dealer friends find things for her. Maybe a great window for a painting on glass like “Georgia in the Garden.” Maybe vintage fabrics or wall paper filled with ideas, or a big picture frame slated for scrapping — till Sciarra “makes trash into treasure!”

Her “Fuzzy Violin” series is a case in point. Attracted to the instrument’s shape, she had turned up violin parts at flea markets. Next, a Tomato Factory colleague

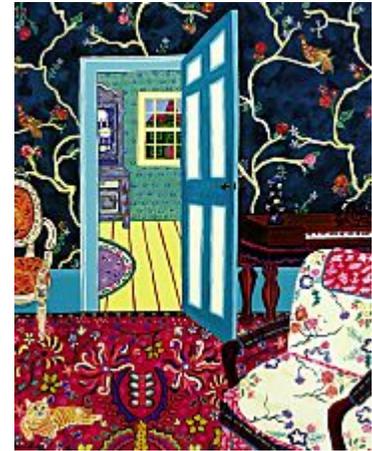


offered her a cache of old fur coats – for \$20. By then Sciarra was pointed toward collage: fuzzy (mink, rabbit and seal) violins in ingenious settings, including “Japonisme,” shown here.



Though she has less studio time now, she’s more focused and prolific during the time she does have, Sciarra notes. (Both her home and studio space are showcases. The latter was artfully created as a new second floor of the garage, immediately becoming the envy of other artists. Private and aerie-like, it’s surrounded by flowering trees and backyard greenery in season.)

Somewhat suggestive of folk art, her earliest paintings showed charming imaginary interiors, fantasy narratives and autobiographical subjects – usually with flattened perspective and much busy-ness via pattern-against-pattern. (“The Music Room” is an example.) If women appeared in the pictures, they were invariably red-haired, as is the artist.



Sciarra’s explorations of feminist and contemporary art followed, with “decorative” still an apt descriptor for her interests and influences. Then, she remembers, one day at a flea market she saw an old washboard and realized that would be “a fabulous surface for her art.”

That “epiphany” led to what she calls her “whole arena of mixed media” art, which includes “found objects,” from ironing boards to dress forms and longhorn skulls to vintage objects and materials.

“Non-linear and more conceptual” have become the operative words for Sciarra’s current art works. She may concentrate more on a color palette than a story, she says, with minute details in only a few areas. The recent “Riad Window” from her Morocco series illustrates this.

“I’m dealing with more serious subject matter in a lot of the mixed media work,” the artist says, pointing to “Love Never Dies.” Starting with the skull itself, the piece suggests the ephemeral nature of life. Titled “Vanity,” her composition on a dress form is Sciarra’s commentary on aging and plastic surgery. Its components include fake nails and eyelashes, mirrors and perfume bottles.



If her work’s at all disturbing, she says, she wants to convey her message in a beautiful, even humorous, way. “But I want to get my point across. I’m a serious artist and want my work to be taken seriously.”

Meanwhile, moving into its third year, Umbrella has added a new designer and will be a presence at designer show houses and select bridal events in the area. Its one of a kind gifts also guarantee unusual wedding presents, and “We’re a great resource,” Sciarra says. “We know great designers, upholsterers, faux painters . . .”

What she says of her business – “Umbrella’s becoming more and more established” – is true as well of Fay Sciarra. With her art on view there and on her website, she thinks the next step may be “an established gallery in New York and maybe LA.”

Those visiting either Sciarra’s studio or Umbrella might all say the same thing: “What a *great* way to earn a living!”

www.FaySciarra.com; www.UmbrellaDecor.com. Phone: 609-466-2800

The Tomato Factory, 2 Somerset St., Hopewell, NJ. Open daily except Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year’s. Monday-Saturday 10-5; Sunday 11-5; *Umbrella is closed Monday*. Phone: 609-466-9833. www.TheTomatoFactory.com.

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