

'Divine in the Mundane'

Artist Fay Sciarra uses everyday objects to evoke the holy, and create a smile or two

By Ilene Dube

Posted: Wednesday, November 19, 2008 12:28 PM EST

THE bleak economic picture has everyone in the dumps, but artist Fay Sciarra is holding her head high. Following Buddhist teachings, she is practicing mindfulness, appreciating "the gift of life in this moment, just as it is, without judgment."

Her exhibit at the Gallery at Chapin, appropriately titled *In the Now*, focuses on the act of creation as meditation. The artist takes us "on a path toward wholeness. My work is always about the wonder of the moment," she says. And Ms. Sciarra's playful use of color, pattern and whimsy is just the thing to lift the spirits during these difficult times.

For those who are already fans of Ms. Sciarra's work, there are surprises: New works, and new ways of working in her signature style. Much here is sculptural and three-dimensional, and even the paintings are mixed media. Ms. Sciarra has a knack for acquiring old relics and jewels and turning them into beautiful, almost holy pieces, like altars.

For 14 years, the former TV producer has been painting on canvas, washboards, ironing boards and biscuit tins, and using such artifacts as wooden sleds and dress forms on which to build her sculptures. Over the years, the work — with roots in folk art — has grown, with more sophisticated use of color and more fanciful magical realism themes. Angels, mermaids, cherubs, chickens, sheep, lamb, bunnies and Belted Galloway cattle continue to populate her world.



"Ars en Re" by Fay Sciarra is painted on a vintage porthole window and evokes a scene from her trip to Ile de Re in the Bordeaux region of France.

"Divine in the Mundane," the title of one of the assemblages, could describe her work in general — there is a holiness embedded in the everyday objects it is made up of: buttons, toys, baby shoes, lace.

"Domestic Goddess" describes another recurring theme, here embodied by a figure whose Madonna-like cone-shaped breasts are made of old wire egg strainers. The head is a collage of buttons, safety pins, rick rack and measuring tape, with a hat made of a thimble. The dress is made of spools of thread, more buttons, packs of pins in pretty foil wrappings and a skirt of colorful zippers, hanging like fringe.

One can only imagine the state Ms. Sciarra is in as she puts it together, or as she conceives a work like "Hecho a Mano" (handmade), a painting/collage of two purses, one made of a cigar box. The entire boarder of the canvas is wrapped with cigar labels.

"'Hecho a Mano' was inspired by my sister Jane's cigar-box purse," says Ms. Sciarra. "I haunted Taste of Cuba (in Princeton) for cigar boxes to rip apart so I could use the actual labels to collage around the periphery. I wanted to make the canvas look like a cigar box itself."

And it does.

In several pieces the Lawrenceville resident takes her technique of reverse-painting on glass (in which she paints the image backwards, behind the glass, so it is visible correctly through the front) to a new level. In "Ars en Re," inspired by a trip to the Ile de Re on the west coast of France, a round wooden frame becomes a scene from a French village, with a church spire, clay roofs, a stone path and old gas lamp painted on the glass. At center is a glass door with a green painted frame, and rusted latch and heavy hinges, centered over the cottage door with a picket fence.

While domestic themes are still implied by the materials, Ms. Sciarra's recent travels to Belgium, France and Italy have added a new influence. "Burano," based on a trip to the Venetian lagoon island with brightly colored houses, was painted on board framed by vintage kitchen cabinet doors.

When using old wood, such as the kitchen cabinets, Ms. Sciarra finds pieces with painted finishes that come with their own level of visual intrigue, then preserves or enhances the old finish. "It's sacrilegious to fussy up old stuff — it has power and aesthetic appeal, and I clean it to bring out the beauty," she says.

Through these antique white door frames we see a provincial European scene: a cat sits in a window with turquoise shutter and lace curtain; laundry hangs from a line; and a marble statue of Jesus with a lamb wrapped around his neck holds court. Burano is known for its lace, and so Ms. Sciarra incorporated lace as well as vintage linens for the clothesline from which also hang panties and a bra. Such visual surprises delight the

viewer.

"While traveling, I don't paint," says Ms. Sciarra. "I refill the well, hike, and enjoy being with family and getting inspiration," taking photographs for her "inexhaustible supply of subject matter." She had been living with that cabinet door until the right opportunity came along to work with it. Ms. Sciarra rarely knows what the end result will be when the initial inspiration strikes — it becomes a work in progress, evolving bit by bit. Her collections in her studio, from old fabric to vintage crepe paper, help guide her.

"Mother O' Mine" is a sculpture built up from an old washing wringer and bits of jewels and ephemera, including Christmas tree ornaments shaped like birds and a pink ring holder. The Tomato Factory Antiques in Hopewell is one of Ms. Sciarra's sources for material — she admits to spending a fortune on the materials used in her assemblages.

Now she has opened her own shop at the Tomato Factory, The Balcony, with partner Marilyn Stevens, formerly of Go For Baroque in Princeton. In addition to Ms. Sciarra's artwork, The Balcony offers "artcessories" — handcrafted furniture, lamps and decorative pieces.

In recent work, Ms. Sciarra says she is letting go of pattern and moving toward abstraction and a more graphic quality to her paintings. "But I'm still interested in telling stories, in the underlying cohesive story, unlike the strictly abstract, which is all about color and texture and being 'untitled.'"

In the very large painting "Rich Waters," for example, a mermaid in Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses is seated alongside her little white merdog on a large tufted banquette, with an old-fashioned telephone on a table. Angel fish swim about, and the wall behind them is covered with sea horses in a harlequin pattern. "Mermaids are a symbol of female power and myth and magic, and they're fun," she says. "I'm sort of poking fun at the lifestyle of the Hamptons. What would a rich mermaid's place in a Hamptons under the sea look like?" At the very top of the canvas is a yacht named "Rich Waters."

Many of Ms. Sciarra's symbols relate to Christianity — angels, lambs, even a baby Jesus from a nativity scene in the work "Sacred Pause." A self-described "Jew Bu" — raised a Jew but following Buddhist beliefs — Ms. Sciarra says "I'm very into symbols. The Christian symbol is universal — no matter what religion you belong to, there are overlaps. I believe there is a higher power within, and it's what we're here to explore. Whether Jewish or Christian or Hindu, there's a lot of emotional resonance in seeing Jesus. And it's all over Europe, on every corner."

In the Now, paintings and sculpture by Fay Sciarra, is on view at the Gallery at the Chapin School, 4101 Princeton Pike, Lawrence, through Dec. 12. Gallery is open during school hours by appointment: (609) 924-7206.