

It's New to Us by Jean Stratton



CREATIVE JOURNEY: “We want to encourage people to treat themselves and get something not found elsewhere; something with a story and history. We’re interested in unusual treasures. There’s really no place like ours; it’s uplifting, imaginative, and exciting.” Artist Fay Sciarra (left) and her business partner and sister-in-law Linda Sciarra are excited about the opening of their new gallery, Umbrella.

Art of Fay Sciarra, Antiques and Home Furnishings Highlight Umbrella Gallery at Tomato Factory

A visit to Umbrella at the Tomato Factory is a visual pleasure. Filled with the colorful and intriguing art of Fay Sciarra and an eclectic selection of antiques and home furnishings from a number of dealers, this “gallery and more” is a haven for collectors, buyers, and browsers.

Located on the second floor of the 100-year-old Tomato Factory, an antiques cooperative at 2 Somerset Street in Hopewell, Umbrella is the perfect setting for her art, says Ms. Sciarra.

“This space became available, and now I have a real opportunity to showcase my art and to show wonderful home furnishings at the same time. We have several different dealers, focusing on antiques, design, home furnishings, and accessories, with different cubby holes and vignettes for their displays.”

Included are Maria Gage Antiques, Russell Hutsko and Richard Hoffman Antiques, Nancy Furey Design, Plumquin Ltd. (Melissa Plummer), and Doris Dixon Antiques.

Eclectic Direction

“We called it ‘Umbrella’ because it is a collaborative group of creative people,” explains Ms. Sciarra. “We wanted people who are creative, who could think beyond the traditional; people who could create a wonderful

environment. The only criterion was to create an exciting visual environment and use of space. We like an eclectic direction. More and more people want to decorate with a mix.”

With her business partner and sister-in-law Linda Sciarra, Fay Sciarra opened Umbrella on April 1.

“I needed a partner, and this was a perfect time for Linda. We have gone antiquing and flea-marketing together, and also, we both like everything to be changing. If something is sold, the dealers will bring in another piece right away.”

“We want people to know they can come here and see different things,” adds Linda Sciarra, who focuses on providing unique home furnishings and accessories offering especially good value. “We want them to be visually stimulated.”

The selection at Umbrella certainly provides ample visual stimulation. In addition to Fay Sciarra’s paintings, mixed media, and sculpture/assemblage, there is a variety of other artwork as well as home furnishings from many periods. Furniture, decorative items, found objects, and more provide the eclectic display.

Of course, Ms. Sciarra’s art is a highlight. Noted for her vibrant use of color, rich texture and patterns, and imaginative whimsy, she works in many media: acrylic on canvas, reverse painting on glass, mixed media, sculpture/assemblage, and collage.

Self-Taught

While she points out that her work has been influenced by Matisse, and more recently, Joan Brown, Bettye Saar, and Robert Rahway Zakanitch, she is truly self-taught. How she came to paint 15 years ago is a story in itself.

“Except for art history, I never had an art class. I really did my own study of art. Previously, I was a TV producer in New York and San Francisco, and I was used to looking for interesting shots and images in that work. My mother was an artist, and when she became ill 16 years ago, she said to me, ‘Why don’t you paint?’ When she died, I decided to follow her suggestion.

“I had never so much as held a paint brush before,” continues Ms. Sciarra. “From the minute I started, I have never stopped! Besides being fascinated by it, it was healing. Painting was therapy for me — a form of meditation. It can be how you channel your memories. Even though my art came from a place of grief, the work that sprang forth is filled with joy. I always keep my eyes open to the wonder around me and the little moments that give life its true meaning. I believe if you put positive energy out there, you attract it.”

“Life affirming” often comes to mind as one views her art. Many critiques have focused on this aspect of her work, which has been shown in many galleries, including The Edge on Canyon Road in Santa Fe.

Sheer Intricacy

Art critic Robert Straus noted in Philadelphia Style that Ms. Sciarra “offers a dizzying array of images with a colorful, dreamlike confluence that draws you immediately to a world that is familiar, yet strange. On the flip side, some paintings are filled with a homey warmth that even the most jaded aesthete would surrender to on sight. There is also a nod to Outsider Art in the sheer intricacy of every scene ... and the mythic, private atmosphere of even her most domestic work. Yet, there’s a wink, as her humor is filled with innocent joy rather than any obsessive disconnect with reality, as is the case with so much Outsider Art.”

The bright colors and familiar scenes in Ms. Sciarra's painting do create happy visions. The very appealing "Carousel" (based on a French carousel she had seen in Il de Re) features a pig, rooster, tiger, and giraffe (all vividly rendered) in place of the traditional carousel horses.

Acrylic on canvas, the painting also includes vintage crepe paper and French perfume labels. "I wanted to create the feeling of the magic of a carousel," explains Ms. Sciarra. "I also love to collect paper ephemera, and include it in my art."

Half of her work makes use of found objects, she adds. These include a variety of items, such as glass washboards, old windows, a laundry wringer, etc. "I use whatever surface appeals to me. I found an interesting old window, and it was perfect for reverse painting. I also reverse painted an old Nabisco biscuit tin."

"Laundry Reverie"

Many of these items, such as the washboard, laundry wringer, and an ironing board, are objects of domesticity and femininity, she points out, also explaining that her work is often autobiographical and "narrates an interior scene of my literal and figurative place in the world, a place where the everyday may become extraordinary: dancers pirouette on the clothesline ('Laundry Reverie'); children are enveloped in a canopy of pink when they make a blossoming tree their jungle gym ('Magnolia Central'); hundreds of glittering rhinestones immortalize my summer baptism ritual ('Outdoor Shower')."

Ms. Sciarra names all her pieces, and a sculpture /assemblage called "Mother O Mine" is based on a Rudyard Kipling poem by that name. "This reflects my mother and all mothers," she explains. It includes little animals — sheep, lambs, rabbits, birds, a swan; also a brooch inherited from her grandmother, and a string of pearls, a sign of femininity, she notes.

Incorporating items of special meaning, such as her grandmother's brooch, gives the piece additional dimension, but as she says, "It takes on a life of its own. It's more than my having to hold onto it. Everything is grist for the creative mill, and it becomes part of the higher purpose of sharing the art."

Both Fay and Linda Sciarra are encouraged with the response to Umbrella in the short time it has been open. "We have people coming from all over, and they're serious dealers and collectors as well as young people just starting to furnish their homes. The prices are all across the board, starting at \$30 and going up to \$6,000. We have a selection of great quality and aesthetic appeal, a mix of old and new and really good value."

Ms. Sciarra especially appreciates the opportunity to show her art at Umbrella. "What I love most about my art is that I completely lose myself in it. It's a totally transporting process. I'm just completely enthralled with art; it's my passion. And I keep learning more and going deeper into the process. Now, with Umbrella, I get to see people enjoy my art. Imaginative home furnishings and my art together: this is my home gallery now. I want my painting to bring joy to people. I want it to bring warmth into someone's home."

Umbrella is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 11 to 5. (609) 455-2800. Websites: www.umbrella-home.com, www.faysciarra.com.