



fine arts

"Tin Washboard" by Fay Sciarra is part of an exhibit of the artist's works on view at Birds of a Feather in Kingston.

Concentrating on 'the wonder' around her

By JANET PURCELL
Special to The Times

Spending time with Fay Sciarra's paintings is like going on a treasure hunt.

They are rife with symbolism, objects and artifacts from her personal life, figments of her imagination and autobiographic glimpses.

A totally self-taught artist who has been painting only seven years, Sciarra has already had solo exhibits in places such as The Chapin School in Princeton and the New Jersey State Museum Cafe.

She is associated with Birds of a Feather in Kingston, The Field Gallery in Martha's Vineyard and Frank Miele Galleries at Madison and 82nd Street and Columbus and 65th in Manhattan.

She was recently featured on NBC's "Today Show, Weekend Edition" during its "An Artist Living Her Dream Today" segment.

Much of Sciarra's work is autobiographical. She paints herself into many of her allegorical scenes, such as the one where she is relaxing in front of her easel in the claw-footed bathtub that is actually in that position in her studio. Or "Salade," where Rabbie, her son's lop-

eared rabbit, sits at a distance watching as her hand-held fork delves into a luscious bowl of greens.

Rabbie also appears in "Resting," a work in progress in which Sciarra is portraying the bunny lying in flowers, reverse-painted on curved glass in an antique oval frame.

A lover of antique shops and flea markets, Sciarra not only includes her finds in her often-narrative canvases, she also uses them as the core of an idea, which she then paints on them. An example hangs on her studio wall: "Carry My Load," an antique wheelbarrow on which a

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self-portrait of the artist is surrounded by symbols of what she describes as "mind chatter, personal issues, anxieties" swirling around.

She did a reverse painting of

her studio on a window from an old church in Philadelphia and titled it "Sacred Space" because, she says, she sees her studio as a living still life.

She does not only paint about herself, however.

"I just always keep my eyes open to the wonder around me — the sheep in a field, pictures I come across in magazines, heirlooms, pieces of furniture, something unexpected that will make

the piece come alive for somebody."

Sciarra's formal education included art history but no studio art classes. She majored in radio, TV and film. She worked for several years as a television producer and never even considered creating art.

But then she moved back East in 1992 to be near her terminally ill mother, with whom she was very close.

"My mother had been an artist. She loved to paint and our house was filled with her paintings," Sciarra says. "I was going through every major stress-creating thing at the time — just basically trying to get my bearings. I couldn't find the impetus to try to free-lance TV producing and my mother said to me, 'Why don't you paint? You have talent and you would love it. Give it a try.'"

"I didn't feel like doing it then, but a couple of years after her death I had a son, Sam (who is now 7) and stayed home to be with him. When he was a year old this thing my mother said came up again and I began to think seriously about it.

"I had my mother's paint box, her small easel and her brushes. I went out and bought a canvas and four primary colors and that was it. From the minute I started, I have never stopped. It has never been a hobby; it's a calling," Sciarra says. "And aside from being fascinated by it, it was healing for me. I had helped my mother die and painting was therapy for me, a way of mothering myself. For me it's a form of meditation."

Shortly after she began painting, people began asking Sciarra if they could buy her work and one thing led to another. The first time she publicly sold her work, in an exhibit at FamilyBorn in Princeton, every piece sold. Offers began coming in for other shows and connections

and, according to Sciarra, the businesswoman side of her started to emerge again.

"I know how to put myself out there. I am clear about how I want my work to be out in the world. I've immersed myself in the business out of necessity and drive and I get tremendous satisfaction having people respond to my work," she says. "The pleasure people get — the emotion that my work brings up in people, that really is satisfying and it makes me feel connected to something bigger."

"But when I got a call out of the blue from the 'Today Show,' I became a basket case for a couple of months," Sciarra says.

It came about when a former colleague, writer Elizabeth Berg, who was also being profiled on the show, mentioned Sciarra and how she, too, was pursuing her dream.

"It was a tremendous gift and I had to give myself permission to accept it. There are a zillion talented artists pursuing their dream and I happened to get chosen," Sciarra says. "To be honest about my dreams on national TV was not easy to do. It was a real coming of age and moving past that kind of old limiting belief that if I shine too brightly, people won't like me. It's time to let that go. To accept the gifts gratefully and graciously is my goal."

Fay Sciarra's paintings and prints can be seen at Birds of a Feather, 63 Main St., Kingston. (609) 683-5514.