

MSUM Alumni Newsletter 2007

Where's Ellen? Painting, Writing, Publishing and Teaching

By Kristi Monson

Ellen Diederich knew she'd always write an art book, but it was the persistent phone calls and e-mails from aspiring artists that really motivated her to put pen to paper.

"I was spending a lot of time on the phone talking to students about the business and emotional aspects of being a working artist, which took away from my own painting time. I figured I should write my advice down so I could just send an e-mail to answer their questions," Diederich said.

Around the time she was contemplating writing an art book, her mother died.

"My mother had a master's degree in English and writing the book became my therapy," she said. "It felt like my mom was with me and I was using her words in my writing. It got me through that difficult time."

"Progressive Painting: Your creative journey," 104 pages, published in 2006, is the result—an artist's guide to overcoming the technical and emotional hurdles of pursuing creativity.

The reviews are positive:

"One comes away from this insightful book not only better informed about painting, but also with a renewed sense of motivation and inspiration." – John T. Salminen, AWS-DF, NWS

"Ellen Jean Diederich leads the novice from initial acceptance of creativity as a special gift and on to its development through a series of increasingly complex concepts and exercises that both enhance and exploit the powers of intuitive art." Raymond J. Steiner, Editor/Art Critic, ART TIMES

"This book is a good read and treasure to behold. It is filled with little pearls of wisdom and insight born of a love of the artistic process. Highly recommended." – Rusty Freeman, VP of Curatorial & Education, Plains Art Museum.

"I love the book," Diederich says. "It holds so much positive information to help people pursue their creative process."

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Diederich's interest in art blossomed when her family moved from the cities to a working farm in Staples, Minn., when she was 12.

“We really learned how to work,” she says. “It was a great experience.” She worked in the vegetable garden and tended the farm animals, experiences that play prominently in her work. Her junior high school art teachers Rose Edin and Russell Norberg nurtured her talent and remain her mentors to this day.

She enrolled at a private college to pursue an art degree, but transferred to MSUM the following year. “MSUM had 52 art class choices compared to eight, plus I would eventually get my own studio space,” Diederich said. “I’m glad I made the change.”

After being fired from a nursing home job, MSUM Professor Richard Szeitz encouraged her to find part-time work in the arts. She began drawing portraits at local flea markets, nightclubs, and retail stores.

“Sometimes I’d go up to people and ask if I could do their portrait for free. I hoped other people would notice and then pay me to do their portraits,” she said.

She earned enough to pay for her last three years of college, but more importantly, she became very good at drawing.

“I did the caricature portraits in marker so I had to really think ahead about where I placed my pen. I had to get it right the first time,” she said.

She graduated in 1983 (BFA-art, B.A.-art education) and taught elementary art in Pine River, Minn., for a year before moving to Fargo to marry Paul Diederich. (He is the president of Industrial Builders.) She couldn’t find a teaching job here, so she fine tuned her artistic skills and has been a working artist since 1985.

“It wasn’t easy,” she admits. “I hadn’t developed any working habits: how to manage my time, how to handle phone calls. I really didn’t know what I wanted to do with my art, so I did all sorts of horrible paintings. My failure rate was probably nine out of 10. Then I started drawing everything more carefully and my failure rate dropped to five out of 10. Today I get four good paintings out of five, which is pretty good.

“I never believed in being a starving artist,” Diederich says, having successfully mastered the art and business of working as a full-time artist. “I have, however, seen beginners ruin their reputations by selling their work before they were secure in themselves. Customers can be a very powerful influence. It takes discipline and education to make both of you happy. It’s important to figure out your work before showing it off to the world.”

Many of her MSUM professors—Deborah May Broad, Richard Seitz, Carl Oltvedt, Tim Ray, Virginia Barsch, Jack Youngquist, and the late John Boyd Holland—are named in *“Progressive Painting: Your creative journey”* as mentors and contributors.

“I had no qualms about making money with my art,” she said. “I had a lot of confidence from portrait drawing,” although she admits to a few mishaps along the way.

“I learned from some of my commissions that looking at it didn’t mean you could paint it.” For example, she painted a sailboat commission where she arranged the sailboats artistically, but since she didn’t know how to sail, the sails blew in all different directions! “There are things about subject matter that need to be understood and appreciated,” Diederich said.

It was a lesson quickly learned. During her 22-year career, she’s only had to re-do two commissions, which is “pretty good,” she admits.

One of her major commissions was for Meritcare’s Healing Art Collection. LaRayne Longtine, manger of public relations and communications at Meritcare, said the collection is designed to create a healing environment that welcomes patients and visitors with familiar landscapes and places that are symbolic of our region.

“Ellen’s art embodies the entire healing environment, with much of her work representative of our region,” Longtine said. “The colors are calming, welcoming and beautiful, evoking positive feelings. You can put yourself in her paintings and be distracted from why you’re in the health care system.”

A neo-impressionist painter, Diederich is well known for combining rich colors and luxurious tones. People often recognize her work, stating that they enjoy the whimsical nature of her work. She loves to paint flowers, domesticated animals and architecture, especially intertwining subjects. “*Where’s Petunia*,” her first children’s picture book released in 2003, beautifully combines her three favorite subjects.

While sketching aboard a flight home to Fargo, Diederich sketched sunflowers, horses, and irises, and also layered a pig on top because she was short of paper. As she doodled, she thought of the pig asking, ‘Have you seen petunia?’ and the horse answers, ‘No, these are irises.’ The theme of her first book was born: a story of a cat looking for its playmate in a colorful and aromatic flower garden. “*Where’s Petunia?*” was Diederich’s first try at fictional writing and self-publishing. The 32-page children’s picture book (ages 4-10) features 37 pages of Diederich’s artwork.

The writing didn’t come easy. “As an artist writing professional literature for my business, I wasn’t in the habit of writing artistically. It was a real challenge,” she said. “However, it was fun including paintings of my daughters and pets in the book.”

Writes Laurie Neill, editor of the Village Family Magazine: “In her first book, Fargo artist Ellen Jean Diederich creates a beautiful and stunning setting for the cat, Art, to search for his playmate, Petunia. This delightful story introduces the reader to various flowers and animals through impressionistic watercolors that provide a visual treat. The reader may be tempted to frame every page!”

She’s working on another children’s book scheduled for release in 2009. It’s a Christmas tale featuring a sheep. “This one has a really good plot,” Diederich says. “With *Petunia*, the paintings were done first and it took three years to complete the story. With the new book, the story fell together pretty easily in about a year’s time. Now I need to create the paintings.”

It's a juggling act she balances successfully—most of the time. In demand as a workshop instructor, Diederich shares her knowledge with local schoolchildren and arts organizations from Nebraska and Arizona to Colorado and Minnesota.

“At the workshops I've sold more *“Progressive Painting”* books than students in the class, so I think I'm doing alright,” Diederich said. Her students agree.

Carmen Bruhn, Fargo, N.D., got to know Diederich first as a student and later as a friend. They often paint together.

“Ellen has been, and is, the painter I look up to, my mentor,” Bruhn said. “The generous teacher who has taught me technique, but most important, she has respected my individual approach to painting watercolor, allowing me to find my unique voice and discover the joy in the journey itself.”

Margaret Anderson, Lancaster, Minn., recently organized a Diederich workshop for Artists Unlimited, a fine arts club for northwestern Minnesota.

“We had a variety of skill levels in the class, and all of the evaluations were very positive,” Anderson said. “Ellen presented the material logically so it was easy to follow along for beginners as well as advanced painters. She's an excellent instructor who brings a lot of talent and experience to her workshops. Plus, she's a fun lady to be around.”

Besides, teaching, writing and painting, Diederich self-publishes all of her work through Givinity Press.

“I've learned a great deal about publishing with all of the printing I do with my original artwork, giclée (zhee-clay) productions, books, and note cards,” Diederich said. “I know a lot about color, and can get printers to reproduce my art the way I want, but I am a better artist than business person,” she admits.

Valuable lesson learned: Reproducing offset lithographs is extremely expensive and results in a decade's worth of inventory. She now offers giclée productions (a process of making fine art prints from a digital source using ink-jet printing), which offer greater variety for her customers without accumulating a massive inventory. “They are more expensive per print, but the quality is worth it.”

Gift stores around the region carry her line of note cards, and you can see all of her products at her Web site, givinity.com.

Diederich is emerging as a notable regional artist, as evidenced by the increasing number of workshop requests from Midwest arts groups, published works in national art journals, and being active in regional art organizations. She has had her work accepted in numerous national and international juried exhibitions and won several awards. She was instrumental in forming the Red River Watercolor Society, and was named, along with Brad Bachmeier, the 2002 Favorite Local Artist by the FM Red River Area Attractions. She's proud of Fargo-Moorhead's nurturing

climate for emerging artists.

“We have the Plains Art Museum, Rourke Art Gallery and several others. MSUM’s art department is really good—I’m lucky to have been able to study there.”

However, the bread and butter of her customer base is from North Dakota and Minnesota, particularly the Fargo-Moorhead area.

“I have a lot of loyal, repeat customers who are very supportive,” Diederich said. One client has 12 of her original paintings. “I really appreciate my customers and let them know that in as many different ways I can. From the beginning, I try not to lose people.” Smart business for an artist.

She’s a savvy businesswoman who is diligent about being a working artist.

“You really need discipline, which is easy during North Dakota winters when you can be in a cozy painting studio. In summer, the golf course calls,” she said. “Discipline is a major part of any artistic endeavor, whether it’s painting, writing or tending to business.”

Diederich surrounds herself with good people and employs an assistant to help in the office and to free up time for painting.

“I try to paint four hours a day, but if I saw all of the paperwork that needs to be done, I’d never get to my painting. Four hours is a good amount of time to sit down and think. I’m usually painting by 2 p.m. and will paint until about 6 p.m.,” she said. “It’s a real treat to sit on the floor and think about my paintings.”

Above all, Diederich is defined by her art. “I’m more interested in the paint, the color and the brush stroke than I am in the subject,” she said. Definitely recognized for her color and style, Diederich uses a lot of rich color and color harmonies. “People tell me they love my paintings and that my paintings glow with rich tones that exude drama.”

Now put that into words.

(Visit givinity.com to see Ellen Diederich’s paintings, books, note cards and other products.)