



Sarah Blumenschein, Pastel Artist

Her signature still lifes play with texture, shape, color, and reflection.

Days before her group show at Weems Gallery, Sarah Blumenschein's home is a flurry of activity. Her signature still life pastel paintings lean against chairs, bookcases, and walls, some ripe for hanging and others awaiting just the right frame. In the kitchen, her eldest son is doing his homework, and, as we chat, her daughter collects the family's rescue dog who is voicing an enthusiastic greeting. Donning a Pampered Chef denim apron and red Keds tennis shoes, Blumenschein gently presides over both

her family's activities and the finishing touches on her show.

Peeking from the stacks of paintings, there's a standout collection of royal blue glass vases with a handful of cardinal-red ranunculus and an overflowing bowl of plums. In another painting, a magenta cabbage rounds out a composition with tomatoes and carrots. In a third, a sage green tablecloth drapes from beneath blush-colored Pink Lady apples. These still lifes are hardly spare compositions; the lush paint-

ings are packed to the frame with country blossoms like gerbera daisies and sunflowers. Each setting appears kissed with morning light.

Blumenschein's work is meticulous; she might spend hours creating the perfect arrangement before she puts paint to paper. If perchance, something isn't right—the flowers out of proportion or the fabric lackluster—she sets the piece aside and begins again.

She cites her training and years as a



systems engineer at Intel for her precision. Although she initially studied art in college, Blumenschein (www.sarahblumenschein.com) turned to engineering because, at the time, she thought the engineering field offered more job security than a career in art.

She had the interest and ability to excel in both, but notes, "I'm better suited to this type of work personality wise. I don't mean to say that I was a bad Intel employee. This just has more meaning to me than my work there."

Mary Ann Weems, in whose gallery Blumenschein has exhibited for three years (www.weemsgallery.com), says the artist's analytical and creative sides are evident in her work. "Technically, you can see the left and right brain working in Sarah's pieces. That rarely happens with an artist. And when you have both sides come together, you get brilliance."

Pat Thompson, who with her husband Greg, owns several of Blumenschein's pieces, notes, "When you buy a lot of art like we do, you can tell when an artist really takes their time with their art. Sarah does."

Upon her retirement from Intel in 1998, Blumenschein devoted more time to art, but caring for her young children hiccupped her attention. She cottoned onto her medium of choice because it so fit her lifestyle: Pastels use the same pigments as oil or watercolor paints, but contain a different



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binding material that forms them into sticks that look much like sidewalk chalk. "If the phone rings and I have to go pick up a kid, I don't have to waste paint that I mixed or wash brushes. I can just drop what I'm doing and go," she observes. Over time, she developed her technique in classes from the Pastel Society of New Mexico, which she touts as a superb way for budding artists to explore and practice.

Still lifes, her primary subject, are also conducive to motherhood. If need be, she can leave a composition set up in her home studio for days, working for hours or sneaking in painting for 10 minutes between changing loads of laundry.

A mom-centric task like a trip to the grocery store never fails to inspire Blumenschein's work. Drawn to vivid colors, which her chosen medium celebrates, Blu-

menschein can hardly escape the floral or produce sections of Whole Foods without alighting on a worthy subject. In one trip to the store, Blumenschein selected a mixed-bouquet of fuchsia flowers, then held up the bouquet to different produce to find just the right items to pair with it (oranges and bright green pears won the day). She looks forward to late spring each year when Bradbury pears, with their deep red color—her favorite—arrive in the store's bins.

Now, Blumenschein paints on a schedule, working from the time her four children, who range in age from 8 to 17, leave for school until they return. She's earned accolades numerous since turning her attention to painting full time. In November 2009, for example, *The Artist's Magazine* awarded her the best still life, and in April 2010, *The Pastel Journal* awarded her the grand prize and

gave her the cover image.

Gallery owner Weems says the praise is deserved. "She has an absolute mastery of the medium. She combines color, design, and technique. It just makes you stare in awe. I already own five personally and I want to own more."

It seems many Albuquerqueans agree: On the end of the first day of her gallery show, Blumenschein sold 17 of her 22 paintings. Not to worry; she's already at work on others. In the future, she plans to keep exploring the Southwestern colors that so inspire her—turquoise, red, blue—and aims to use every shade in her pastel set. For Blumenschein, whose collection is extensive, that's quite a lofty goal. 🍷

—By Ashley M. Biggers

For more information, visit www.pastelsnm.org.