

15 MINUTES

Screen printing goes on behind closed doors

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

Art can be created in fields, bedrooms, coffeshops, on street corners or anywhere. Last Monday, it was happening in a small office studio, located in a strip mall in South Fort Myers.

"Moonlight Sonata" filled a cluttered, florescent-lit room, coming from a stereo hidden somewhere among the inks, dyes, brushes and clothes — supplies needed to turn imagination into physical reality.

Four ladies were bent over folding tables, using a process called screen printing to transfer images they created to pieces of cloth. It's a method that was also used by famous artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.

"This is a class in deconstructed screen printing," explained silver-haired teacher Arlene Richards, who turned 76 on Dec. 9.

The students pick whatever objects they like to create images on a template — for example, leaves, grass, paperclips or nails. Then they use a square screen to print the template onto linen, cotton or some other fabric. They use a squeegee to drag a thick, viscous ink over the top of the screen. The ink seeps through, dyeing an image on the cloth.

"Try and pull (the squeegee) towards yourself," Ms. Richards advised student Kathy Guardia. "You can get a better, stronger pull that way."

Ms. Guardia, unsure, frowned at the indigo and terra-cotta colored images she

was creating. Ms. Richards came over and considered it for a minute.

"Oh yes — oh — that's fantastic," she concluded.

When Ms. Guardia was finished screening her images onto the cloth, she hung it up to dry on one of the clotheslines strung across the room.

"I used different pieces of lace, thread and bubble wrap," she said. "On the second application, I used leaves and twigs."

Ms. Guardia, 64, used to create men's ties under the name "Katherine Barnes." They have been sold in specialty stores and displayed in art galleries in Southwest Florida. Although art is her passion, she hadn't created any in a while.

"I'm wanting to get back into it," she said. "When I saw Ms. Richards' work, it inspired me."

In between offering her students reassurance and technical assistance, Ms. Richards had created her own template using Starbucks cupholders and other objects. She was busy screening the image, in dark purple, onto a piece of cotton cloth.

She was "deconstructing" the image by making each printing less distinguishable than the last, so distinct images were layered among watery, indistinguishable ones.

"What I end up with is a ghost image," Ms. Richards said. "It just gives you more possibilities. I like the fact that it changes and becomes something different as I go along. This was just another way to layer the images on the fabric so it's more complex and interesting."



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Arlene Richards

After the images dry, she might make a dress out of the cloth or layer more screen prints over the top.

"There are so many things I can do to continually build on this," she said.

Ms. Richards has taught regular sessions in fabric dyeing and surface design at the studio since she moved to Fort Myers in 2003.

She has been an artist and teacher most of her life. After growing up in the Chicago suburbs and graduating with a master's degree in art from the University of Illinois, she taught art education students at Slippery Rock University (known by

students as "Slimy Pebble") in Pennsylvania. Later, she moved to Cape Cod, Mass., and opened an antique and gift shop.

"I used to come down here (to Florida) during the winter," she said. "I finally bought a condo down here."

Now she lives in a house with her roommate in Fort Myers. Ms. Richards recently taught a course in Shibori, a Japanese technique for dyeing patterns on fabric, at the Alliance for the Arts in Fort Myers.

Most of her screen printings, and the physical objects she uses to create templates for them, are inspired or taken literally from nature.

"I'll walk along the street and see pieces of grass that are laying in the gutter and pick them up, because they look interesting to me," she said.

Her favorite artists include Mark Rothko, an abstract expressionist who worked in New York City in the mid 20th century, and figure painter Milton Avery.

Ms. Richards doesn't have any family in Fort Myers. But over Christmas, she usually meets up with a niece and her husband who are from California. Last year, they met in Washington, D.C., for the National Cherry Blossom Festival. This year, she'll meet them at the Santa Fe Indian Market, where more than 600 Native American Indian tribes display the art they created over the last year.

Ms. Richards also has two dogs at home and, with an artist's eye for color, named them appropriately: Coffee is a Shih Tzu and the other one is a small, friendly half-breed named Smudge. ■

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