

Teachers made difference in her life

Story: CORINNE ABATT
Photos: MINDY SAUNDERS

Two good art teachers made a lot of difference in the direction of Barbara Coburn's career as a studio artist. Her first show of paintings, acrylics, watercolors and an interesting combination of these two media is on display at Artisans Gallery of Southfield through Nov. 26.

Mrs. Coburn, who now lives in West Bloomfield with her husband Roland and two children, was known as a weaver and fiber artist long before she switched to painting. When the family moved to their home in West Bloomfield, Coburn, looking at the large expanse of bare walls and suggested his wife do something about filling them.

She had majored in painting at the University of Michigan and taught art at Southfield High School for several years, so painting wasn't an unknown quantity — just one she hadn't pursued as actively as she had fibers.

When she began to study again, she said, "I had two really fantastic teachers who really motivated me, Hava Schaver and Lorraine Chambers McCarty."

From large paintings, which Mrs. Coburn described as "erotic and sensual, using the human form," she progressed to abstracts that show admiration for Paul Jenkins.

"It's not just throwing down paint," she said. "It took me a year to achieve with spontaneity and energy."

To achieve this she often uses a combination of watercolor and acrylic paints — putting acrylic over dry watercolor and "adding and subtracting paint."

"The acrylic is mixed with media and washed off," she said, explaining that this can be done many times to build up layers. The 300-pound paper

which she likes to work on holds up well through this process.

She would like to work even larger than she does, but tapestries are considerably larger than the paintings, but the available sizes of the paper have placed limitations on her.

The subtracting of paint by rubbing or sponging it away was put into perspective for Mrs. Coburn by Mrs. McCarty.

"She used to tell us that it was just as important to take paint away as to add it," Mrs. Coburn said.

From including figures in her paintings — more simple human forms — which appear to be searching for identity or caught in a web of discord, Mrs. Coburn is moving toward pure abstract minus figures. Both approaches are, however, represented in this current show.

She also has acrylics done without the watercolors, but prefers the combination of the two because of the challenges and multiple-layered effects she can achieve.

Because of the responsibilities that go with raising children and keeping a household going, Mrs. Coburn frequently works in her laundry room-studio in the early hours of the morning.

"Once I get going," she said, "I have so much energy and so many ideas that I am often running down the stairs in the middle of the night to paint."

With her career as a painter now launched, and some of the techniques under control for the kind of work she wants to do, Mrs. Coburn feels she has made a giant step forward.

And while all this was happening, she nicely filled the empty walls of the Coburn home with large tapestries, huge acrylics and fiber works.

Artisans Gallery, 19666 W. 10 Mile, Southfield, is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, Thursday until 8 p.m.



Combination of watercolor and acrylics gives this Barbara Coburn abstract its depth. Many layers are applied and sponged or rubbed off to achieve the final result.



Educated at University of Michigan as a painter, Barbara Coburn was a successful fiber artist before she returned to her original media — watercolor and acrylics.

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