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In Abstraction, Very Real Success

Nina Mickelsen came late to painting, but is making up for lost time

BY MARY ANN BENYO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT NATHAN



Nina Mickelsen points to an irregular swish of gold leaf on a magenta background with little pink and blue circles. "That's 'Sunset in Assateague Bay,'" she says. Mickelsen laughs heartily, obviously familiar with the need to explain some of her works. She gestures to "Ocean Breeze" and "Heat Wave," and there is somewhat of a resemblance between the title words and the images. Sort of. She's quick to add, "No, you're right. These are abstracts. A natural artistic evolution."

On another wall of her studio, bright, playful images depict beach balls, sailboats and seashells, part of her "Beach Fun" collection. Her works on wood, rough linen or canvas, depicting easily recognizable subjects

Lewes-area artist Nina Mickelsen's mixed-media art shows influences of her Finnish roots with strong colors, clean lines and crisp images.

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Nina Mickelsen works in her home studio on "Dune Grass," one of her silk-screen pieces. The silk-screen process is precise and controlled, she says, and requires many steps.

as well as abstractions, all show the influences of her Finnish roots — strong color, clean lines, crisp images, often featuring a lot of white.

"Strictly speaking," she explains, "in an abstract, you might start from a tree or something you see, then you pull some elements out." She gets lost in creating a painting, often working early mornings or late into the night to follow her muse. In the end, she describes the result as "free-flowing, enjoyments of paint and how the paint lays down on the surface. And then it becomes something."

Mickelson herself isn't what she started out to be either. After earning three degrees in business, she moved from her native Finland to accept a job with the World Bank in Washington, D.C. Before retiring 15 years later as a senior program manager, she took a few courses at Corcoran College of Art + Design in painting, printmaking and digital art, and she earned a certificate in graphic design. "I'd never had any art [instruction] in my life before then," she notes. Now, with sales of her works in Europe, Scotland, the Nordic countries, Hawaii, and the U.S. East Coast from New York to Florida, she too has become something in the art world.

It all happened in the last decade. Mickelsen took the leap into early retirement, combining the best of her business and marketing skills with her newfound

case, the silhouette of a lobster's head and claws — that prevents the paint from coming through, so that only the background section of the canvas will be lime green. When it dries, she will use a series of other screens with different patterns that allow the rest of the image to emerge in two tones of pink along with a slice of a bright lemon yellow.

Although this lobster is one of her best-selling prints, many of her works are unique. In a recent one, she says, "I'm kind of exploring the paradox between abandon and discipline." Mickelsen observes how esoteric that might sound, but it does indeed seem to reflect her own life: her envy of the plein air painters who create art on the fly versus her interest in techniques that involve numerous steps and large pieces of equipment. "I'm pretty precise — that's why I'm in silk-screening, because it's pretty precise. ... This is a very controlled process."

As a work evolves, "sometimes art tells you something about yourself. But," she adds, "the most important thing is for me to communicate with people, to see what it evokes in them. I love talking with people in my booth [at outdoor shows], seeing their reaction when I created something they want, going to their homes and figuring out together, 'What can we do about this wall?'"

Myriam Khalifa appreciates all the time and effort Mickelsen put into designing and creating two large pieces for her home outside Rehoboth. "Nina was amazing to work with. She spent a lot of time with me, and I absolutely love

“Strictly speaking, in an abstract, you might start from a tree or something you see, then you pull some elements out.”

love of art. Her husband, Don, has been very supportive — "my champion," she says.

In their Lewes-area home's downstairs studio, she demonstrates "pulling a screen" — one of the many steps it takes to make one of her paintings. Not a traditional silk-screener, Mickelson describes what she does as "painting through a screen." Fastened flat against her worktable is a sturdy aluminum frame, with a thin nylon fabric screen (used for the modern equivalent of silk-screening) stretched tautly across the underside of the frame and resting on a piece of canvas already taped in place. Pushing a wave of bright lime green acrylic paint across the screen with a two hefty squeegees, she works quickly, using a flick of her wrist here, more pressure there, moving the paint back and then pulling it across a particular section again to press more paint through all the tiny holes in the fabric and onto the canvas below. Part of the nylon has a simple pattern — in this

them," she says. "They make such a statement in my house." Jenifer and Scott Edmonston echo that sentiment, saying, "She exceeded our expectations in every way" when creating artwork for their Bethany Beach home.

While Mickelsen is appreciative of her patrons and their responses to her art, she knows it's still imperative to market one's work. "For a successful artist, it takes a lot of time," she notes. More than half of her time, in fact, is spent on the business of being an artist, rather than creating artwork. She lists participating in a dozen shows each year, making sure sales taxes have been paid in a "gazillion" different states and keeping up with the bookkeeping, maintaining a current website, keeping abreast of Facebook and Instagram, working with the Gallery One cooperative in Ocean View a few days a month, and attending membership meetings of the Artists' Exchange and the Lewes Artists Studio Tour.

After taking care of all the business requirements, her biggest challenge is having the energy to paint, which is "taxing, physically. There's a limit to how many screens I can pull each day." Despite the demands on her body, she can't resist painting almost every day. "When you allow the creative faucet to open, it's like a floodgate!" she exclaims. "The more you work, the more you work, because the more ideas start piling up. They queue up; they push each other; they negotiate with each other, throw each other out."

With all these ideas jostling about in her head, Mickelsen tries to use her time wisely. She works, she says, "a mile a second" in hopes of catching up to her peers who have been painting all their lives. At 60, she wonders, "What paintings do I want to make in the time I have left?" And that decision-making process is "an exploration of my own limits. Can every painting take me to a technically and intellectually better artistic place?"

As much as Mickelsen enjoys these challenges, she says with a laugh, "in my next life, I think I'd like to be an artistic curator." ■

MARY ANN BENYO, a longtime Delaware resident, is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life.

More on Mickelsen

Nina Mickelsen creates both prints and originals. Her works range in size from 12 inches by 12 inches to 3 feet by 5 feet, and in price from \$320 to \$5,000. She will be part of the Lewes Artists Studio Tour on Saturday, Sept. 17, as well as the "Small Jewels" exhibition, Nov. 26-Dec. 31, at Peninsula Gallery in Lewes. Her work can also be found at Gallery One in Ocean View. For more information, call (703) 973-1033 or visit ninamickelsen.com. ■