

Practical application

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By Alex Browne
Arts Reporter

Artistic expression doesn't always choose a simple canvas.

Take Nicci Battilana for example. Her colourful, fanciful paintings (some with applied jewels) adorn jean jackets for adults and children, and lately they can be found on pillow cushions, highly individual martini glasses, shot glasses and wine glasses-and ceramic teapots and vases.

But the Peninsula resident is known to paint on canvas, too, usually stylized acrylics of women's faces similar to those found on the jackets and cushions.

Battilana's work is attracting attention. She demonstrated the range of her wares last week on CityTV's Breakfast Television.

Jackets are what started it, however-an offshoot of high school art classes at Queen Elizabeth Secondary.

"I took them in the last two years of high school. People thought they were the easy classes, but I quite enjoyed them, and also photography.

"You always had to do the assignments on the canvas or the paper, but during free time I would paint on jackets and T-shirts and people would comment on them." Back in those late-'80s, Battilana would paint whatever came into her head when she was outlining on the material with permanent marker.

"It was generally the punk-alternative, cartoony style, writing and drawings with peace symbols and happy faces and typical diamond shapes," she said. She was her own best advertisement-never afraid to make a statement by wearing her own jackets and shirts.

"People always used to look at me in malls-my mom didn't care for that. She's not an attention-seeker type of person, but for me it was just fine."

The seeds of a cottage industry were planted. After graduation, school friends started asking her to do jackets and T-shirts for them, and she began to build an extended word-of-mouth following.

"The continuing ed principal at Semiahmoo Secondary, Theresa Reilkoff, bought three jean jackets from me in three years," she said.

Battilana even taught a few courses for continuing education on painted clothing, and took one herself on glass painting with enamels, primarily because she wanted to decorate a few items for herself.

These days, Battilana is a new mom (she and husband Marco's first child, Duran, is 11 months old), she's still on maternity leave from the travel industry, and the time is ripe for more active entrepreneurship.



Alex Browne photo

Nicci Battilana showed off some of her colourful hand-painted glassware, cushions and jackets at her South Surrey home.

"In the beginning, people would always tell me 'you're so talented', and I'd be 'yeah, right', but as I'm older now, why not do something I enjoy?"

Word-of-mouth is still important in attracting clients who want to buy glassware and ceramics as gifts.

"The martini glasses are really popular, and I just heard from a woman who got one of my teapots a couple years ago as a gift. She's been looking for me, so I could make some other pieces. It's great to know she's still enjoying the work."

Typically she'll meet with clients who know about her style and want to commission specific work.

"I'll find out what the person likes, what his or her interests are.

"They're personalized, especially the jackets."

But Battilana's been reaching a broader audience by doing small showings at local events-she enjoys the feedback -and is planning more.

She has glasswork in Make It Memorable (1446A Johnston Rd.); she'll present her work at Langley's Arts Alive festival (Aug. 21, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.); she's scheduled to teach jacket painting for advanced students at Tiggy Winkle's Folk Art Studio in Crescent Beach in August; and she'll demo her work in September at South Pointe's Artful Things.

Like others, she has the problem of producing work not easily pigeon-holed, and which doesn't meet the strange, unwritten edict that all art must represent landscape and nature. Ironically, she's even found it rejected from some local venues as a craft, and from craft venues because it is too artistic.

"I think I'll have to be more selective with what pieces I bring to each venue," she said.

"Or maybe have two different websites."

Her current website was created by Marco, and she's surfing the Internet to see what decorated items are selling.

"I'd like to try to make more money with the work, and following trends obviously works, but I try to give the pieces my own flair."

Among the most popular items she's added to her repertoire lately are cushions. Inspired by painted cushions she collected during a visit to South Africa, they've been a late addition.

"There's been a lot of interest really fast," she said.

"Everyone's into home decor these days and they're looking for neat things to spice up a room, things that are bright and fun, things that add colour for people afraid of painting their walls one colour or another.

"There are a lot more people who would be willing to have the cushions rather than have the jackets-you really have to have the right personality to wear the jackets." Which doesn't mean Battilana has cooled off on her original inspiration-not by a long shot.

"Anytime I see someone wearing a plain jacket it seems like an empty canvas to me. I want to go up to the person and ask if I can paint it."

For info on Battilana's work, visit <http://www.brushedwithmagic.com>

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