
Entertainment

Erika Wastrom paints the world she knows

By **John Greiner-Ferris / Banner Correspondent**

Posted at 4:33 PM

Artists are often advised to seek out subject matter close to home, to deeply explore the things of which they already have profound personal knowledge and understanding. It's advice that is often ignored, so it is refreshing to walk into West Barnstable painter Erika Wastrom's little barn studio and be treated to some very intimate, slightly abstracted, colorful paintings, all about 16 inches square or so, of the things and people that make up her life.

These are paintings she is pulling together for her upcoming show at Gaa Gallery, which will open this Friday alongside the work of Jane Corrigan. They will appear in Gaa's Provincetown Project Space, a smaller gallery well-suited for the scale of her work.

Wastrom is busy. She has a busy, thoughtful mind that spins and charges, stops short, nearly throwing the rider, then she nimbly changes directions, bumping into herself on the way back, before tearing off in a completely different direction. On this particular day, along with her show, she's also busy shepherding her two toddlers.

It's definitely a family thing at her cedar-shake homestead, which sits on the edge of a marsh, set back from the road on the Old King's Highway. Wastrom's boat-builder father, Bob, was minding the boys. He then handed them along to her husband, Dan, who runs a landscaping company and rearranged his schedule so that an interview could take place — an interview about Wastrom being a Cape Cod painter and juggling the roles of artist, wife and mother.

A few points to know about Wastrom's earlier years: She is a 13th-generation Cape Codder, claiming that title back to Constance Hopkins and the Mayflower. ("It's no big deal," she says, offhandedly. "There are a lot of us.") Outer Cape artists Jim Peters and Vicky Tomayko were her teachers at the Lighthouse

Charter School. She concentrated in ceramics at Alfred University, where, if anything, she gained an appreciation for surface and an interest in objects. Some of her more productive, formative years came as a grad student at Boston University, or, as some of the women artists called it, BU: Big and Ugly, in reference to the big-ass paintings that were in vogue there at the time. “It wasn’t who I was at all, and it was then that I started painting small,” Wastrom says. “At first, I was nervous, and I thought I’d be ripped apart in my critiques. But I think if I’ve got something big to say, it will come through even if the painting is small.”

And in the end, size mattered less than attitude. “It was at BU where I became more comfortable with myself and my perspective,” she says. “I’ve always wanted to make serious work, and I constantly ask myself, ‘What do I have to say?’ If my paintings don’t have purpose, what’s the point to them?”

It was also at BU that her work caused a fight between her professors. Is it whimsical? If it is, so what? What’s wrong with whimsical? “I like these intimate views,” Wastrom says, looking around at her studio. “I like that they’re small. There’s something about them that is reminiscent of illustrations. They could be a page from a children’s book.”

John Walker, under whom Wastrom studied at BU, told her just to go in the studio and make things. “He’d say, ‘Don’t overthink it.’ If you can let go of being self-conscious, that’s when something interesting happens.”

She’s been painting almost exclusively on paper for about 10 years. “I love paper, because the surface of the paper is fragile, but the surface also does things that canvas and panels can’t do,” she says. “I’m always accessing Matisse,” she adds. “Color holds air within the flat space.”

Wastrom doesn’t consider herself a regional artist. “These aren’t Cape Cod paintings,” she says. “I do think my colors come from the Cape. If you walk the beach at dusk, the sand is a muted neon. If you really look, you’ll see that. But I’m not dealing with Cape Cod. I’m dealing with being a wife and a mother. There are a lot of myths about being an artist and being a mother and an artist. I want to have it all.”

She paints when her kids nap in the afternoon and when they sleep at night. And

given her time constraints, the smaller size format makes sense. She thinks of the 84-year-old British painter, Rose Wylie. "I'm looking forward to being an old lady," Wastrom says.