

The Philadelphia Inquirer
The Community Public Information

[Subscriber Services](#)

PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

[Subscriber Services](#)

philly.com
THE REGION'S HOME PAGE

Philly
Women

Posted on Thu, May. 10, 2007

Woman of the Week: DEBORAH SCHAEFER

Artist, A.K.A. "Art Girl" , Caricatures by Debbie Schafer

Marilyn Russell

RELATED STORIES

Our Woman of the Week this week is an accomplished fine artist, cartoonist and caricaturist whose work ranges from whimsical invention and toy design to classical representation, medical illustration, and oil portraiture. Her one woman show, Chutzpah, Schmaltz, Whimsy and Realism: The Art of Deborah Schafer opened April 29th at the Temple Judea Museum at Congregation Keneseth Israel on Old York Road in Elkins Park, PA and runs through June 30th.

Nominated by Sherry Hoffman to be this week's Woman of the Week, Sherry had this to say in her email about Deborah: "While Deborah bases her art on the aesthetic principles of grace and humor, she uses deeply observed realism to create images that open the heart, invite intellectual participation, and create joy." Even more telling about Ms. Schafer, is that she puts her talents to use to bring smiles to hundreds of cancer patients, drawing their likenesses at area cancer centers.

WOTW: How did you get your start?

Deborah: I started drawing quick sketches at Hess's Department Store upon graduation from High School. I auditioned by drawing a portrait in charcoal of the owner of Hess's. I was 18, and very nervous. That charcoal portrait fell just a little short of something I considered to be awful. But the owner, Philip Berman, who was also a renowned patron of the arts, encouraged me and gave me a space on the first floor of the store. I set up shop: I drew profiles and full view portraits for four and six dollars, and worked all summer before beginning college as an art major the following fall. As a fine artist, I began showing and even selling my work while still in college (Philadelphia's Tyler School of Arts at Temple U). I also free-lanced as a caricaturist and graphic artist.

WOTW: Making money in art often takes years...how did you generate business?

Deborah: I started "Art Girl" my caricature business, in 1991. It was an eventful year. My marriage was ending, and I knew that my "real job", as valuable and rewarding as it was (I was art and activities therapist in an acute crisis psychiatric hospital.), did not fulfill a gnawing urge that never subsided: I needed to create

my art. A brief encounter with caricaturist, who was busy drawing at Macy's one day, changed everything. I stopped in my tracks and stood behind her, watching as she drew one person after another. It was as though divine providence set in. Focused on the face of the person she was drawing yet sensing my presence, she addressed me: "Do you do this?" she asked. I replied, "Yes." "Want a job?" I said, "Yes" without a blink. I took a leap of faith and after a summer of commuting 2 hours each way to the Sesame Place (I was living in Atlantic City at the time), I began to build my business closer to home. I started by working at every fair and craft event I could, developing my skill at drawing caricature as well as my business. I developed seasonal quick sketch businesses at a number of Jersey Shore Resorts, including Morey's Pier in Wildwood and the Steel Pier in Atlantic City. Winning my first international award as "Caricaturist of the Year" from the National Caricaturist Network was especially good for business. As my good reputation developed by giving, I built a base of return customers who also sent referrals. Eventually I was able to let go of the retail business, maintaining the caricature entertainment business with clients ranging from large corporations and organizations to private parties. This enabled me to pursue my fine art.

WOTW: What do you like best?

Deborah: As an artist, I get to paint and draw and try to take total control of the world within my canvas. As a performer, I get to meet a lot of fascinating people and improvise and play with them as they pose for their caricature. I make all the decisions about my business. I'm the boss, the director, the CEO. It's also the not the best thing because running the business end of things is not the fun part. Most importantly, I also continue to study classical realism with contemporary master artists, most notably my teacher and mentor Nelson Shanks. I paint and have continued to develop my fine art skills. This I do for myself as I try to keep up with my ever-escalating standards.

WOTW: What is the hardest thing for you to accomplish?

Deborah: Time management and maintaining a schedule while juggling all the hats: Balancing creative time, production time with the nuts and bolts aspect of business. Then of course, there's also my life. The best stimulant for creativity, though, is a fast approaching deadline.

WOTW: Of what are you most proud?

Deborah: At the moment I am very proud of my one-woman exhibition, "Chutzpah, Schmaltz, Whimsy and Realism" which just opened in Elkins Park, PA at the Museum of Temple Judea in Keneseth Israel Congregation. On display is a selection spanning 30 years of my work: My fine art, including my most recent oil paintings is beautifully displayed alongside my humorous Judaica illustration as well as other work hardly anyone has ever seen. I am so delighted that the museum's curator, Rita Poley, was so capable and willing to exhibit my eclectic diversity as an artist.

WOTW: What's most rewarding for you?

Deborah: My most rewarding work is drawing caricatures of people during the midst of their I.V. chemotherapy treatment. It changes the "climate" in the treatment room, draws out conversation and social interaction between people in the room, and brings the flush of smiles and joy into an otherwise gloomy and sobering reality. Howard Kesselhiem at the Center for Cancer and Hematological Disease in Cherry Hill had the idea 10 years ago, and I have been doing it there ever since. Humor is part of the healing treatment.

WOTW: Describe your overall philosophy and how you utilize it with your responsibilities at work

Deborah: As an artist it is my intention to connect to a greater consciousness that others are likely to relate to. I aspire to appeal to the senses, to evoke intellectual participation, and to invite the viewer to play. My guiding aesthetic principles are beauty, grace and humor. I endeavor to create images that open the heart, that summon compassion. Using deeply observed realism I try to communicate the sanctity of life. Using

humor in the form of whimsical drawing, I sometimes caricature and sometimes cartoon as a way of relaxing social constraints and encouraging connection between one another. Humor is the shortest distance between two people.

WOTW: If you could change one thing in our world, what would it be?

Deborah: Poverty and inequity of education between the “have” and “have-nots” on a local level and a global level: Impoverishment, oppression and neglect are fertilized conditions for the breeding righteous indignation and teaching of hate. Carl Sagan said it succinctly in *Pale Blue Dot*, 1994: “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life...it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

WOTW: What is your guilty pleasure?

Deborah: A really good bagel with cream cheese, tomato and olives.

WOTW: What CD or book would you want to have with you on the proverbial desert island?

Deborah: The Entire New Yorker Anthology.

WOTW: What advice would you share to someone just getting started?

Deborah: Stay organized. Keep in practice. Be gracious. Establish good relationships with your colleagues and fellow artists. Share with them, learn from them. The better we are at what we do, the more demand we create for our profession. Keep up your standard of quality, but don't let the internal critic keep you from participating and putting your work out there. Be brave. Trust that something good will happen. There's enough business for everyone.

WOTW: What's next for you and your work?

Deborah: I'll be focusing on painting, developing a body of figurative work as well as my whimsical art coaxing out images that have been in my imagination for many years. It's about time and I'm ready. I may be teaching some workshops. As for caricaturing and entertaining, that will always be part of my life. I like the improvisation of it and the humor in it. I like people, and especially laughing with them. It's fun.

So if you're looking for a Mother's Day present for this Sunday, may I suggest taking Mom to see Deborah's one-woman show, Chutzpah, Schmaltz, Whimsy and Realism

running now until June 30th at The Temple Judea Museum at Congregation Keneseth
Israel on Old York Road in Elkins Park, PA. Details at: <http://www.kenesethisrael.org>