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Abstract painter takes color out of the box

BY MICHELLE GENZ
STAFF WRITER

Viewing Dee Solin's artwork is like looking through adjoining panes of glass, the prism of their edges breaking up the swaths and streaks of color that form her abstract paintings. Her large, intensely-hued compositions appear as a shattered whole, yet ordered in squares, as if overlaid with mullions in a window.

Solin's urge to stack squares is inexplicable, she admits. But it pre-dates her artwork – even her notes from childhood form grids.

"I think in squares," she says. "It helps me organize."

In her art, the lines and right angles chart a course for the eye in the mayhem of her brushstrokes. "A grid helps people find a focus, a horizon line in my paintings."

Solin, 55, who paints full-time, is among only a handful of abstract painters in Vero's arts community. Her style is hard to classify, beginning with the gestural layers of abstract expressionism but honed and worked with great precision within her grids.

She creates her works in very disparate surroundings; the south barrier island oceanfront home in Vero Beach that she shares with husband Darrol Solin, and the gritty workspace she shares with a dozen fellow abstract painters at the Art Students League of New York, a half-block away from Carnegie Hall. The group there is under the leadership of instructor and painter Ronnie Landfield, who provides guidance and inspiration in the French atelier tradition. Here, she finds kindred spirits at the Vero Beach Museum of Art.

Both institutions have acknowledged her talent.



Abstract painter Dee Solin in front of two pieces from her Genesis project

Photo: Tom McCarthy Jr.

Last month, one in a series of paintings she calls "The Beginning" won a "red dot" – the first prize, at the Art Students League's weekly exhibition, earning a place in the League's the annual competition. Three years ago, her painting, "Interpretation," won Best in Show at the Vero Beach Museum of Art's Art by the Sea juried art show. Another painting, "Transcendence," won an honorable mention in an on-line competition of the National Art Club.

Those flashes of recognition are enough for Solin, who is not represent-

ed by a gallery, and is generally loathe to sell her works. After winning the Art by the Sea prize, she put what she thought was a "crazy price" -- \$6,000, on the painting. It sold, much to her husband's chagrin, who asked her to replace it with a copy. She did.

"I've never painted to please anyone," she says, adding with a laugh: "No one ever understood what I was doing. I've sold to friends and family, but otherwise, my paintings are all in my closets."

Indeed, her surroundings at the

Artists League would flummox many Veroites. The grand 19th century building, designed by an architect who worked on the Plaza Hotel, houses an industrial grey interior, unadorned but for the artwork, that has served as studio space for artists for more than a hundred years. While her fellow artists focus on the coarse features of a live model who has dozed off in her chair, Solin dabs at her palette, and alters a shade of blue to a more intense hue, following her instructor's suggestion.

Amidst the bohemian aura, a tanned

and trim Solin stands at her easel in a punch-pink sleeveless top and tailored jeans, looking like she stepped off Worth Avenue.

In fact, the Solins were not taken with Palm Beach, where they first bought a condo and spent a few seasons living their dream of being near the ocean. One day, they took a drive to Vero, and fell in love. "We bought our house within a week, even though we didn't know anyone here," she says.

That was ten years ago. It was yet another transition in a life of bold steps. Solin met her then husband-to-be at a dinner party in Connecticut in 1995, on a brief trip to the states. At the time, she was living in a farmhouse in Provence that she had renovated over the previous five years. The house, in San Remy, had been a storage area with a dirt floor, full of old tools and tractors. "It was in ruins when I bought it," she says. "Darrol says I speak 'construction French' because I learned everything from the workers."

By the time they met, though, the house was essentially finished. Solin summed up her status over the next year, and over frequent visits with Darrol, decided she "wasn't going to let him get away," and moved back to the states.

"I miss France very badly," she says. "It seems everyone we know is a Francophile, and we go back often."

Born and raised in Westport, Connecticut, Dee's father had an ad agency in Manhattan (as did her husband, Darrol, by coincidence). After earning a bachelor's degree in fine art from San Francisco Art Institute in 1975, she took a job with Revlon in New York, as a brand manager creating new products and designing packaging for perfumes. "I hated it. I was miserable," she says. "I didn't like the corporate world; I was a free spirit. But it gave me a lot of confidence."

Eventually she went to work for her father's firm, then moved to London,

and eventually to France, all the while painting what her sister always called her "cubies."

Four years ago, her "cubies" took another form, when she sequestered herself in her studio for a month to produce a color-mixing chart.

"Every day, I'd paint a row," she says, recalling the intensive precision of mixing each color and finding its place on a five-by-five-foot grid.

"I thought I lost her," jokes Darrol Solin.

When she emerged, 851 squares later, that chart, which she named "Magic Palette," was immediately picked up by the international art supply distributor, Blick; so far, more than 200,000 have sold, Solin says, in art supply stores and academies across the country and abroad. The grid is a color-mixing tool made up of hundreds of colors, calibrated so that artists can choose the exact hues they want to replicate, then follow the graph-like chart to the colors' primary and secondary origins in commercially available tube paints.

Brick just launched another Solin invention: this one, intended to show how colors react to other colors surrounding them. The device fans out like swatches from a paint store, with windows cut into the color blocks so that companion colors can be seen within them.

"I'm not a teacher – I just know color," says Solin, who spent three years studying master paintings, and copying works from Braque to Kandinsky. "I can hit any color easily, and that's just from practice."

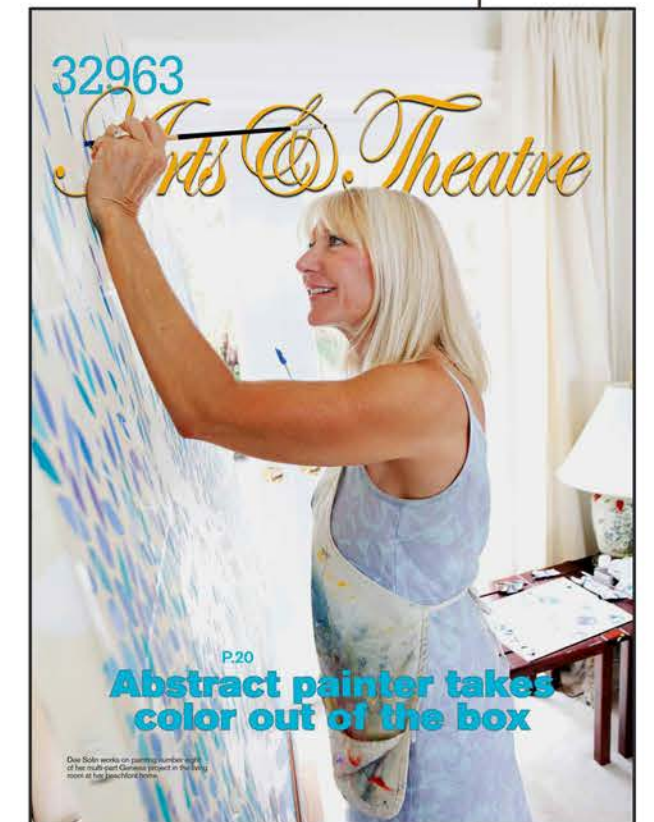
The Solins keep an apartment in Greenwich Village, where Dee Solin spent most of May, and typically spends a week a month during winter. Summers, she spends in Vero Beach, taking classes at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, and meeting with a critic's group of local fellow artists including Dawn Miller and Ann Weibel.

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"I don't like being away from my husband for too long, but I love being in New York, on my own. I paint all day, every day. I don't have to eat, I don't have to cook. I buy a rotisserie chicken that lasts five days."

That urban existence is a world away when she returns to the peace of Vero Beach. "I love the summer in Vero," she says. "It's quiet, it's pretty, and we get to use the pool. Floridians don't use the pool in the winter."

"But I'll never let go of New York," she says. "I love the balance of being able to come here. When we arrived the other day, I realized you forget how beautiful it is here, the peace and the sunlight. It is a very special place."



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