

LOCAL LIFE

Acclaimed Hill artist also teaches medical students

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by Lou Mancinelli

Abstract art. What is it? Each of us might have his/her own interpretation. but for long-time Chestnut Hill artist Marianne Mitchell it is an exploration of consciousness, the cosmos and the brain's relationship between the simultaneous experience of intuition and logical thought.

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For decades, Mitchell, 52, has been creating abstract art that has been exhibited at galleries and purchased by collectors across the nation, and is hung in notable locations like the PEW Charitable Trust, Post and Schell Law Firm in Wyndmoor and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. But it was only in the past few years that Mitchell came to understand the full spectrum of her creative process.

This new understanding has been a leading element in the inspiration for the pieces Mitchell plans to display in her upcoming exhibit at the Rosenfeld Gallery, 113 Arch St. in Old City, Nov. 3 through 27, her seventh solo exhibition at the Rosenfeld. The collection, "Cosmos Reflected," includes eight acrylic paintings on wood panels, and 10 pastels on paper all created in 2011.

"Over the past few years," said Mitchell during a recent interview, "I've come to understand this particular process that has to do with the integration of intuitive and logical thought."

In fact, next year will mark the third consecutive year Mitchell has taught the practice of making abstract art to students at the Division of Medical Humanities of Drexel University College of Medicine. In this class, she teaches students to be more aware of their intuitive processes. This can be effective for western medical students whose medical studies often focus on the science of medicine, and overlook the intuitive aspect of healing, she believes.

"It's a way of thinking that may get lost in the current practice of left brain [the brain's organizational/logical side, the side of mathematics and science] medicine. There it's all about science and not so much about what compassion and emotional intelligence can bring to the table [for a patient.]"

When Mitchell paints she begins in a place of reckless abandonment. One might compare the idea to the Buddhist concept of clearing the mind during meditation. From there, she picks up a painting tool and begins to add color, shape and form to a canvas. Then, she steps back and reflects in a critical manner on the piece. What should come next? How does it make me feel? This is when her intuition begins to inform her logical thought process.

"At a certain point, I see something ... I feel like I capture the essence of a place," said Mitchell, who attended Germantown Friends School (GFS) as a youth from 1964 to 1977 and was raised in Lafayette Hill on Andorra Road in the home designed by her father, famed architect Ehrman B. Mitchell. When her parents moved in 1994, Mitchell lived in the home until 2010, when it was sold. She now lives in Haverford with her husband Bruce Schmit. Her daughter, Kirin Schmit, attends Bennington College in Vermont.

At that Lafayette Hill home Mitchell also ran a word-of-mouth summer camp staffed with GFS grads to keep her daughter occupied during the summer. There Mitchell met Dr. Steven Rosenzweig, a Chestnut Hill resident whose daughter attended the camp. Dr. Rosenzweig practices integrative medicine and is a clinical assistant professor in the department of emergency medicine at Drexel College of Medicine. Integrative medicine combines western medical methodologies with alternative and holistic treatments.

Friends suggested to Mitchell that she talk to Dr. Rosenzweig about working with medical students about how intuition can inform logical thinking. "Marianne's course is an opportunity for medical students to step out of the task of memorizing facts and explore other ways of knowing themselves and the world through abstract painting," said Dr. Rosenzweig.

"It made me see a connection between the work I do as an artist and how the process can affect changes in other sectors of life," Mitchell said. "I'm bringing increased awareness to how the right [creative side] and left brain work together to create a resolution, whether it is a business decision, a [medical] diagnosis or a painting."

Mitchell has always been an artist. As a college student, she changed her major from graphic design to painting after her school, the University of Washington, won a competition design for a commercial for Walla Balsam shampoo. "I didn't want to spend my life designing commercials," she said.

Mitchell comes from a celebrated line of female artists. In the mid- 1800s, her great-great grandmother toured the country as an opera singer, and her father's mother was a professional concert pianist.

In 1958 her father founded Mitchell/Giurgola Architects (with Romaldo Giurgola), which designed buildings like the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Building in Philadelphia by Independence Hall and the Australian Parliament House buildings in Canberra, Australia. Today, the firm is known as MGA Partners, and Chestnut Hill resident Robert Shuman is a partner.

Mitchell considers the highlight of her career to be her 1992 Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation Fellowship. In addition to teaching at Drexel and for 10 years at the Main Line Art Center, this fall she is working with Temple University College of Medicine to bring her course, "The Practice of Making Abstract Art," into their medical curriculum.

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