

Subtextile

Bold colors, fabric folds inspire Pleasant Ridge painter

By ELIZABETH H. VOSS
Special to The Oakland Press

Fabric has special meaning to Lynn Arbor, partly because she associates it with feminine creativity and comfort, but its colors, folds and shadows also make it a favorite muse.

An impressive show of 30 bold, colorful oil paintings at the Birmingham Unitarian Church is the result of Arbor's concentration on textiles as a subject for the past 2½ years. She also has two pieces in an exhibit at the Scarab Club in Detroit.

"In a painting, the fabric and tissue can do things, magical things, that can't happen in reality," she says. "Yellow cotton can leap in the air. A tissue pattern, all crinkly, can confront a scrap of fabric."

When a friend spent the night at Arbor Pleasant Ridge home, surrounded by paintings of fabric and sewing patterns pinned to cloth, tears filled her eyes and she said, "I feel like my mother is here." The friend's mother had been a seamstress. So Arbor felt confirmed in her decision to use material as her model.

"I see it as women's creativity," says Arbor, 63, who changed her last name as a feminist statement 30 years ago; inspired by artist Judy Chicago, she adopted part of the name of the town she was born in, Ann Arbor.

Perhaps because she associates

cut cloth with mothering — both her mother and grandmother did some sewing — fabric has emotional meaning to Arbor. In the 1970s, she made a quilt when she was going through a divorce.

"It was so comforting to have piles of fabric around me," she says.

Several years ago, she decided to use textiles in her painting. When her two children were growing up, she sewed quite a bit. Two great aunts made hats as milliners, and her maternal grandfather had a drapery and upholstery business.

"I was thinking fabric tied my family together, so I started using fabric," she says.

With 25 years of experience as a graphic designer in advertising, Arbor has a strong sense of composition and design. In this work, she explores color and form.

She piles fabric on a drafting table and shines an angled lamp toward it. She shoots photographs, plays around with them in Photoshop, and then paints from the images, using a glazing technique to build layers of color with oil paints. This is a departure from the watercolors she worked with in previous years.

The result is more abstract and surreal than ordinary still life painting. Bold, luminous color contrasts to folds of shadow and dramatic black backgrounds. "Color can be a metaphor for life," says Arbor, who believes the colors can represent emotions.

"I like them as abstract compositions," says John Bogner, 61, the artist's husband and a retired architect. "I see something new in them every time I look at them."

Arbor inherited her artistic skills from her mother, who painted for pleasure and taught her how to draw at the kitchen table. She grew up in Detroit, Ferndale and Birmingham, and studied art at the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center and Wayne State University and graphic design at the Center for Creative Studies.

Six years ago, she quit working as a freelance graphic designer to concentrate on painting. A scare with pneumonia helped her make the decision. Since then, she has exhibited her work in many solo and group shows in Michigan and elsewhere, and won numerous awards. Last year, she sold 19 paintings to the Sinai Center for Women at Huron Valley-Sinai Hospital in Commerce Township.

"I've been particularly impressed by the breadth of her work," says Jane

Linn, 53, a West Bloomfield Township resident who is president and chief executive officer of the

Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center. "She has an insatiable interest in and devotion to exploring different styles and pushing her own limits. I'm always interested and excited by her work."

Scarab Club gallery director Treena Flannery Ericson agrees,

"I think she is an incredibly skilled artist. She is one of my favorite artists in the Detroit area."

Artist friend Margarete Nargarkar believes Arbor's new paintings represent a big step forward in her career.

"Her work is more personal. She's expressing more about herself with this work," says Nargarkar, 48, who lives in Southfield and works with wax and mixed media. "This is more challenging to the viewer and she's gone

to a much larger scale."

Most of the paintings are 36-by-36 or 48-by-48.

"It's a step forward if you leave something behind that you are comfortable with and challenge yourself and do something new," says Nargarkar, who is in an artist group with Arbor. "That's what she has done with this work."

If you go

Thirty new oil paintings by artist Lynn Arbor are on display through June 19 at the Birmingham Unitarian Church, 38651 Woodward Ave., Bloomfield Hills. The church is open 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Mondays and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays. The paintings are available for purchase, and Arbor will donate 20 percent of sales to the church art committee. Call (248) 647-2380 or visit www.bucmi.org. Also, two oil paintings by Arbor are on display through June 30 in a juried group show, "Blooms, Bugs, Beasts," at the Scarab Club, 217 Farnsworth St., Detroit. The gallery is open from noon-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday. Call (313) 831-1250 or visit www.scarabclub.org. To see more of Arbor's artwork, visit her Web site at www.lynnarbor.com.



"Sneeze" (top) and "Fearless" are among Lynn Arbor's paintings.