

Magical Margo Datz: Mermaids to Men in Wave of a Brush

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FEATURES

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By RACHEL NAVA ROHR

It's unlikely that anyone - even the most rushed day tripper - could visit the Island without getting momentarily lost in one of Margot Datz's murals.

For those that live here, there have been many occasions that the Edgartown painter's work drew them in like a waking dream - the luminous view of Ocean Park on the walls of Seasons in Oak Bluffs, the sensuous summer night scenes enveloping the former Hot Tin Roof nightclub, the precise panorama of Vineyard Haven harbor at the ferry terminal.

"I have a lot of the physical maladies of a house painter, but there is something about mural painting - the scale is so exciting," said Ms. Datz, sitting on the front porch of the log cabin she built in 1979. "There's such a feeling of incredible achievement when you finish something big - and I like that idea of doing things for many people."

The self-taught painter has adorned hundreds of Island walls with her acrylic illusions that make onlookers question what is real and what is representation, what is flat and what is three-dimensional. She is skilled in trompe l'oeil - trick of the eye.

It's that skill that turns the once-plain walls of her home and many other private homes into wooden barn posts, crumbling stucco, exposed brick, stone, vines and gardens. Ms. Datz continues to be active in her mural business, in addition to putting on a highly anticipated once-a-year art show in August.

Last year's show, Mermaids, Metaphors and L'amour, was nearly a sell-out of the original pieces that will be soon become the illustrations for a book Ms. Datz has written. She summarizes the book, A Survival Guide for the Landlocked Mermaid, as "everything I learned the hard way, dipped in chocolate and covered in pink sprinkles." Simon and Schuster plan to release the book on Mother's Day 2008.

Singer-songwriter Carly Simon is one of Ms. Datz's longtime patrons. In addition to commissioning Ms. Datz to paint murals that cover much of her home's interior, she asked Ms. Datz to paint the Hot Tin Roof and illustrate her four children's books.

"She's such a light," Ms. Simon said of Ms. Datz. "I'm so amazed by her all the time." Noting that she has been around great art and artists her whole life, she added, "I can tell you that Margot is the real thing."

The two have also become good friends, since Ms. Simon first hired the multi-talented former sculptor Ms. Datz to sew her a dress for a music video in 1981.

"She always gives me ideas for songs - not because I ask her to, but because she speaks adding such novelty to new and universal ideas," Ms. Simon said. "She's a great transition from mother earth to my mouth."

Ms. Datz can enrapture a bystander as easily as one of her paintings. Her voice has a way of sounding like music and her words have a tendency to resonate like poetry. She imparts wisdom with a melodic laugh and a knowing smile. She is tall and poised with long wavy hair and flowing skirts; she wears bold jewelry and vivid colors.

"She's been my teacher and I love her," Ms. Simon concluded. "I truly think she's been one of the most special people in my life."

Like a well-articulated sentence, Ms. Datz's individual paintings often evoke a feeling of truth - as well as a smile or a laugh.

With signature humor, the pieces bear names like "Something about him made her want to be naughty" and "She'd been a bad, bad mermaid" and include a metaphoric zoology of mermaids, fauns, deer, lovebirds and "green men."

While that humor has tended to go over well with audiences, Ms. Datz said she sometimes feels embarrassed when she realizes what she has painted and thinks of exhibiting it at her show.

"I guess I trance when I paint. Something pulls me with this underwater rope, and when I come up for air, I see what I've done," Ms. Datz said. "[The feedback] has actually been a really validating experience for me."

Her show this year will be on Saturday, August 11 at the Grange Hall in West Tisbury. Between now and then, she hopes to focus on painting men, as opposed to the women and mermaids that have occupied her thoughts for some time.

"The paintings are about good men and their connection to the earth," Ms. Datz explained. "I think that the future of the planet rests in large part on the shoulders of good men. There are a lot of bad men out there."

Ms. Datz said that she has much compassion for the opposite sex.

"I've been observing men for a long time. I think good men need to be told how wonderful they are," said Ms. Datz, who was married for 20 years and remains good friends with her ex-husband, she said. "Having to be my own man for 10 years has made me keenly aware of what a good man brings to the table," she added.

She has pulled many late nights in the last year, between painting pieces for the show, working on private mural commissions, redesigning her Web site margotdatz.com and spending time with her family - children Scarlet and Wolfie Blair, ages 26 and 20, and pet dog Yoda, a hairless Chinese Crested with a natural mohawk and painted nails.

She has no set schedule or routine. "My inner clock looks like a Salvador Dali painting with the clocks dripping off the trees," she said. But she does try to find time for a bubble bath in the backyard tub.

"Every single night of my life that it is humanly possible, I take a hot bath and read something spiritual," she said. "I call it church. You go back and run a wonderful bubble bath and leaves fall on you and rain falls on you. It's just beautiful. The season's so short here. We almost get gluttonous for the time we have."

From February to April this year, Ms. Datz spent her time in a different kind of church - St. Joseph's Catholic Church in New Orleans.

In 2005, Ms. Datz was chosen as one of four artists to paint murals in the church. But less than two months before she was due to start work, Hurricane Katrina hit and put the city under water.

"Man plans, God laughs," Ms. Datz said. Following the storm, she offered to come anyway, and do the work at cost.

So in the dead of New England winter this year, she packed her bags and travelled to the balmier but still ravaged city, where St. Joseph's was now in the process of building a refuge center in the middle of a barren parking lot for the homeless and displaced. It emerged like an oasis, she said, and is set to open on the second anniversary of the hurricane, next month.

"They were bringing life up through the asphalt to a group of people where beauty wasn't even a consideration," Ms. Datz said.

Bible imagery of floods and oases became the focal point of the eight by 28-foot mural she painted in the atrium of the late 19th century church, with its pillars and high vaulted ceilings. It was the first liturgical mural she had done in which she worked directly with scripture.

"What that community was seeking was some way through the crisis they had experienced - some transition piece of artwork that took them from crisis to hope," she said. "The opportunity to be an illuminator of the Bible was illustrationally a terrific artistic challenge. It required a lot of research."

The experience was additionally moving for Ms. Datz because she has a long history with the sybaritic city. Sculpting - her first chosen art form - took the small town, upstate New York native all over the country. She was showing in Madison avenue galleries by the time she was 19. Eventually, she landed in New Orleans and stayed for four years, until moving to the Vineyard in 1978.

"It strongly affected who I am as a person today - my sense of joy and celebration, my work hard, play hard ethic. It was so sensuous," she said. "It was wonderful coming down from the north to this mecca of sensuality and it made me so unbelievably happy to know that my soul had such a home. That's why Katrina was so heartbreaking to me."

She was deeply affected by the continuing homelessness and despair.

"My mother was a homeless person and I never felt like the story was mine to tell. But she's died now and I feel that her story is one that could now help a lot of people," she said. "She went from being Betty Crocker to being homeless to being the oldest fully matriculated student in the UMass system."

A lifelong artist, Ms. Datz's mother became a national merit scholar at the University of Massachusetts and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

"This has turned me into a terminal optimist. If she can make it through hell's labyrinth, others can too," she continued. "A series of events happened in my late teens. We lost 11 key family members in two years. I would have become an alcoholic, too; where else do you go when you've just been crushed under the heel of life? I don't have judgement for her, but I do have incredible gratitude for her recovery and the people who helped her."

Ms. Datz hopes to do more public art in the future. This project, along with a giant mural she did in the Arkansas Children's Hospital, were two of her most gratifying projects.

"The reward is it feels extremely purposeful," she said. "I think one of the dearest, most spiritually deep experiences I've been able to have is having my art connecting with the community."

About the Author

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