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Skies, Sunsets and Surf

Much of Lea Novak's subject matter comes from her travels, but there's also that scene just out the front door.

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By Megan Sullivan



A retreat to a tropical island paradise inspired Lea Novak to become a painter. The Hamilton resident didn't have to travel far to reach the hidden escape — she created one right in her garage. Ms. Novak and her sister transformed the unattractive white, spackled and taped-up garage walls into an inviting beach scene, complete with palm trees.

"My older sister had been teasing me because for three years in a row, our Fourth of July picnic got rained out," Ms. Novak recalls. "Half the people ended up in the garage... so she said, 'We need to paint the garage. We need a tropical island paradise in here.'"

Ever since painting the mural about five years ago, Ms. Novak has fully immersed herself into creating new works of art. After taking art classes everywhere from craft stores to Mercer County Community College and Artworks, the budding painter has worked her way up to having her first solo show. The exhibit, *Scenes from the Summer (and Other Memories)*, is on view at Triumph Brewing Company in Princeton through Jan 5.

As a child, Ms. Novak's artistic impulses were limited to school art assignments, hallway decorating and the occasional attempt at drawing portraits. Before the garage mural, the only other artistic work she could claim

in adulthood was designing page layouts for technical writing projects.

For the past 12 years, Ms. Novak has worked as a technical writer for the Office of Information Technology at Princeton University. This past June, the office had its first employee art exhibit, thanks to Ms. Novak's suggestion. "I had just been reading this book about how to be a success as an artist," she says, "and it said you have to keep your eye out for what's going on and suggest the possibility of a show if something comes up."

When Ms. Novak first started painting, she began by copying pictures from art books, but quickly yearned to paint her own memories and scenes. She now primarily paints from her own photographs, but would like to do more painting on site. "You learn a lot more that way," she says.

The first landscape Ms. Novak painted outdoors was of Sayen Gardens in Hamilton, looking across a small pond. She captured a big tall pine tree that towers off the top of the canvas, and its reflection in the water. When looking at photographs she had taken of the same scene, Ms. Novak noticed that the tree fit beautifully in the frame of the shot. She realized the painting wasn't exactly done to scale, but that's how she interpreted the scene. "It's not accurate," she says, "but it's what impressed me about the picture and that's what you're trying to capture."

Through this experience, Ms. Novak realized that painting en plein air is entirely different from painting a photograph. "It just goes to show that your eyes focus differently than the camera does," she says. "It really is all in the sense of this quote I read by an artist who died recently that you don't see with your eyes, you see with the mind. Your eyes are just collecting the data, your brain is interpreting it.

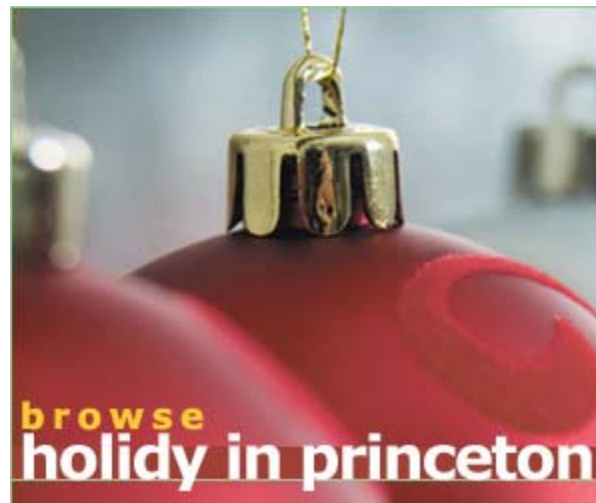
"You can see that so clearly when you look at what you do, if you're standing there in front of something painting versus what you get if you take a picture with a camera," she adds.

Other works that will be featured in the show include "Grey Day on the Beach," for which Ms. Novak won best in show in 21st Century Art's juried online exhibit *Horizons* last year. She painted it from a photograph taken in West Palm Beach, Fla., while on a business conference. It rained the one free day she had, but Ms. Novak walked around and took pictures despite her bad fortune. Palm trees blow wildly in the background, the clouds swirl in the blue-gray sky and the waves break upon the shore, wearing away at the sand. A tiny person walks along the water in the distance, and in the foreground a glass bottle has washed up during the storm. "That is such a typical beach scene to me," she says.

"Day is Done," painted from a photograph taken at St. Pete Beach, Fla., was featured in the 25th Ellarslie Open *Salon des Refuses* at the Trenton City Museum. "The very first night we took a walk on the beach at sunset and I got these great photographs," she says of the scene. Beautiful pink, purple and orange hues spread through the sky and empty beach buggies span across the bottom of the painting. "Day is done, gone the sun... the toys are put away for the night, the people have gone home. It's time to call it a day," she writes in the painting's description on her Web site.

While Ms. Novak has dabbled in still-life paintings, it's evident she can't resist painting skies, sunsets and surf. "Seashore Reflections" is a beach scene from a recent vacation to Gloucester, Mass. Ms. Novak took a picture looking down at the shallow water, the waves just rippling in, and one stray piece of seaweed floating about. "I'm so entranced by the light reflecting under the water," she says. "In that picture, you really get the shadows of light moving and the light going through the wave in the shadow."

Other locations that have inspired her landscape or seascape paintings include the scenic overlook of the Delaware River from Route 295, Belmar Beach. Cape May. Island Beach State Park. Carnegie Lake in Princeton. the tow bath along the D&R Canal and even outside her own



home. Ms. Novak has captured some beautiful sunsets seen right from her front doorstep, "Just to prove you don't have to go far to find something that's inspiring."

Scenes from the Summer (and Other Memories) is on view at Triumph Brewing Co., 138 Nassau St., Princeton, through Jan. 5. Hours: Mon.-Wed. 11:30-1 a.m.; Thurs.-Sat. 11:30-2 a.m.; Sun. noon-midnight; (609) 924-7857; www.triumphbrewing.com; www.leanovak.com

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