

# Montague artist creates 'painted prayers'

By NINA BANDER  
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**I** came across an excellent definition in a new book I picked up called "Art & Fear" by authors David Bayles & Ted Orland: The job of the artist is "to draw a line from your life to your art that is straight and

clear." Doing this takes much personal courage, since art-making is fraught with uncertainties: fear of not finding acceptance and approval from an audience, the disillusionment of unrealistic expectations, the bravery and vulnerability necessary to find our own voice, the myth that "talent" enables hard work to come easily — artists have numerous clubs to beat themselves up with, in addition to the damage an unappreciative audience may do.

And although the authors stay away from issues of religion, from my own conversations with artists about their work I have found many "straight and clear" lines that are illuminated by the lantern of spiritual faith, the making of art both a prayer and a stepping stone along this path.

Artist Donna Estabrooks' path is illuminated by the light of her faith in the Lotus Sutra. A follower of the Nichiren Daishonin sect of Buddhism since 1987, Estabrooks calls her colorful paintings "painted prayers." She is able to intuitively find archetypal forms in her paintings that have an immediate and compelling appeal; it often happens that an Estabrooks painting is a buyer's first purchase of fine art. Some artists seek only the connoisseur: Estabrooks positions her larger canvases in gallery windows where motorists can see them, and has even sold one of these to a man who called her on his car phone after driving by and falling in love with a painting.

She recently bought a house in the village of Lake Pleasant in Montague after her apartment building in Northampton changed ownership and tenants were asked to leave. Estabrooks had only recently determined that her successful career should manifest itself in the purchase of a house and land while she was

at a Buddhist retreat the week before. She had even imagined that her ideal house would be found next to "clean, clear drinking water" before setting eyes on the property. When she saw the house she immediately realized it was the house of her dreams, just perfect for herself and her 4-year-old son.

Estabrooks' studio has been located in Florence since 1991. Two years ago she found gallery space on Main Street in a storefront rented by accountant Rick Kristek. Kristek had purchased one of her paintings, and when Estabrooks saw the reception area of his office she realized it would be an ideal gallery space with its large, ground level windows, attendant secretary during business hours, and close proximity to her studio. A deal was struck, and though business hours off season are early, 5 a.m. to 2 p.m., Estabrooks can be there in a moment's notice to open up for afternoon visitors.

Estabrooks has permanent representation in numerous Maine and Massachusetts galleries. A one-person show is slated for the gallery at the Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton during the month of August. Locally, she has work on display at the Blue Heron Restaurant in Montague Center and the Little Pine Cone Co. in Millers Falls. For those who haven't yet had the chance to visit the Little Pine Cone Co., owners Genea Curbow-Healey and Daniel Healey have played a key role in the revitalization of Millers Falls by renovating the Bridge Street storefront into a boutique/gallery in one side and a soon-to-be-open coffee bar and video store in the other. The couple offer New England and Mexican influenced gift ware and home furnishings, including twig furniture, pots, braided rugs, handmade quilts, candles, Mexican crafts, soap

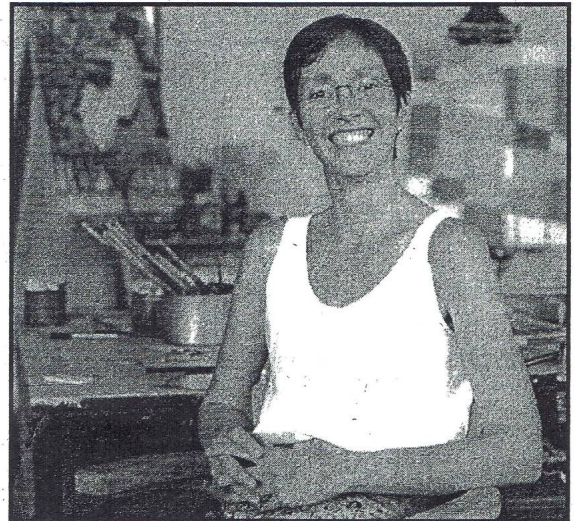
and fresh cut flowers. The series of Animal Totem paintings currently on display in Millers Falls has roots in a series done several years ago that were painted following the loss of her first son, Bennet, nine weeks into the pregnancy. Self-blame and depression followed the miscarriage, and the artist was unable to paint or teach. A turning point came when students in her creativity class designed and led a session specifically aimed to help their teacher begin to heal through expressing her grief and loss through artwork initiated during the session. Back to painting again after this breakthrough, she found certain images reoccurring in her work.

"I don't plan symbols in my head; I usually make a mark and feel it out. All these ravens and angels were showing up in my work, and I didn't know why until I looked in a book on totems. It said if you've chosen Raven it means magic is in the air; that it is the power of the unknown and something special is about to happen. I hadn't been able to figure out the miscarriage, and this was healing for me. I felt Bennet's connection again, as if it were there all along and I hadn't lost it."

The current series of paintings convey specific energies associated with each animal, explains Estabrooks, likening the idea to the art of Feng Shui, the Chinese art of placement that strives to create harmony with the Earth's energies. Sometimes choosing the symbol and sometimes letting it arise

from "scribbles," the totem paintings are accompanied by an explanation of the energy associated with each symbol. For instance, inviting the bluebird into your life invites modesty, unassuming confidence and happiness; the bear invites introspection, healing, and divinity; and so forth.

"I think my best paintings are those that come out quickly," says Estabrooks, who once completed seven paintings in three days. "Things just instantly go into the piece, it is immediate and magic." In other words, Estabrooks manages to



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stay out of the way of her own art.

Is this habit of surrender fostered in large part by deep faith? Is there a link between the manifestation of prayer and the making of art, between accepting life's uncertainty and having faith in one's mark on blank canvas? Says the artist, "I paint the things I want to manifest and put them out there as an affirmation ... I feel like my business plan is prayer. The more I chant and study, the more benefits I have in my life." (Nichiren Buddhists practice the daily chanting of the Lotus Sutra, "namu myoho renge kyo.")

Estabrooks was artist-in-residence at the University of Massachusetts for nine years after graduating with a bachelor's in painting in 1982. She continues teaching private and group lessons at her studio in Florence. "My goal is to help people be their true self, to make their authentic mark. I like teaching and I learn a lot from my students. I take that lesson into all parts of my life: that everybody and everything can be my teacher."

Her teaching experience has inspired her to begin work on a

book in the form of a deck of cards. Each card will have a set of brief instructions, instructions on how to play various games she has invented for her students. The game is "a method of working, a way of starting in on the work that could be used at home and doesn't require special supplies."

She believes art should be inclusive, not exclusive: "I want people to just be able to DO IT. You don't have to be a MFA, just turn over the deck and play the game!"

Her work, known for its loose, confident brushwork, joyful colors and incorporation of archetypal symbols (and occasionally inspirational words or phrases as well) is on view at the following locations: The Estabrooks Gallery in Florence, 139 Main St., open

during business hours of 5 a.m. to 2 p.m., call 586-3869 or 584-9090 for further information; The Little Pine Cone Co., 28 Bridge St., Millers Falls, 659-3195, they are open Tuesday through Saturday, 12:30 to 6 p.m.; The Blue Heron Restaurant at the Book Mill in Montague Center has a series of floral paintings by Estabrooks in the dining room, call 367-0200 for more information.

