

Port Washington Patch

ARTS

Small-Town Artist, Big-Time Art

TV's "The Good Wife" Features Port Painter's Oils.

By **Annie Blachley** September 11, 2010

Many artists flock to large cities seeking exposure for their work in the high-stakes art world. Then there are those who reject the urban grind altogether.

Little did Port Washington painter Ellen Hallie Schiff know when she settled here that the city's reach—in the form of one of television's hottest dramas—would pluck her work from the suburbs and broadcast it to millions. Talk about exposure.

But this small-town painter is no mere dabbler in oils. Her large abstracts, built from slapped-on palette-knife foundations, explode in "splatters and splashes," and "gorgeous eruptions of color and paint," notes art reviewer Chuck Varricchio.

When talking about how her path has taken unpredictable turns, her eyes crinkle and light up when she smiles, which is often. Despite the boldness of her paintings, she displays none of the flamboyance that many artists exhibit.

She was born and raised in Bay Shore. Her father, a psychologist, painted briefly and her mother, also a psychologist, played piano. She majored in nutrition before marrying and moving to Manhattan. She recalls driving through Port while visiting relatives in Roslyn. When she became pregnant, she wanted to raise the children in a good community. She moved to Port in 1985, where, she says, "I've been so happy—this is a great town."

Then, in 1998, fortune intervened. Nearly 50, she was working at two part-time administrative jobs—but she wasn't happy. She had an interest in early American art, but no creative outlet.

"I went to a psychic. She told me, 'I see you painting flower pots.' So I just walked into Steve's [Steven Lampasona, longtime teacher at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn] intermediate painting class."

After studying with Lampasona and East End landscape painter Christian White, great-grandson of architect Stanford White, Schiff started exhibiting in local stores. Port shop owners, she says, are very amenable to displaying artwork. She adds with a laugh, "I have a permanent exhibit at Jenny Nails," where she rotates many paintings. Martha de Groot, the interior design store on Lower Main, also welcomed her paintings.

In August, fortune smiled when a native Port Washington woman who worked in television stopped by the Martha de Groot shop. Diana Salzburg, assistant set decorator for the multiple Emmy-award-winning "The Good Wife," expressed interest in Schiff's artwork, so shop owner Nina Silverstein put the two in touch. After looking at ellenhallieschiff.com, Salzburg picked two works from the website, the same day—without seeing the actual paintings. Three days later, Schiff brought the large canvases (48 inches by 60 inches and 18 inches by 24 inches) to the show's Brooklyn set.

Starting with the Sept. 28 season premiere, Schiff's "Hot Spot" (the larger painting) will be displayed in the fictitious law office that drives the show's action, and her "Untitled Red" will hang in the apartment where Will Gardner, the firm's lead partner, lives.

Schiff is quick to praise Port's artistic side, saying, "There are a lot of like-minded people here. I think Port Washington is a great art community, and it's so vibrant." She points out how The Art Guild, of which she is a board member, has increased its membership and profile with a home at Elderfields Preserve, and cites the library Art Advisory Council's many exhibits as another plus.



The artist's "Hot Spot" is 48" x 60"; oil on canvas. Credit Ellen Hallie Schiff

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Nevertheless, does she ever miss being in the city? As she says, "I do have clients in the city, and they find me."

They certainly did.