

View From The Top

Terry Dunlap Designs

By Theresa Malone Clode

The human spirit is amazingly resilient. We watch people rise to the tops of their sport, business, or art, and we admire them. But when we see people who have overcome hardship rise to the top or rise back to the top, then we really take notice. Through them we are reintroduced to the human spirit of courage and hope.

Legendary comeback stories abound. Think Lance Armstrong, Nelson Mandela, J.K. Rowling. They overcame adversity in their lives and came roaring back. Challenges seem to have strengthened the resolve of these people and countless others like them, catapulting them from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Similar stories of inspiration and triumph can be found closer to home. Local artist Terry Dunlap is living such a story. Well-known in the 1970s and 1980s in Colorado, New Mexico, and California for her striking and unique watercolors and original Wallscapes, which transformed walls into ethereal landscapes, Terry became so ill she was unable to paint for nearly two decades. But today she has shaken her illness, is painting again, and feels her art is better than ever. In fact, in the two years since she has returned to painting she has become internationally recognized with a collection of her modern florals now showing in Dublin, Ireland.



Terry Dunlap, Artist

"My painting is prolific right now," Terry says. "I feel like I need to make up for lost time." She is determined to succeed, she adds, and believes the hiatus from painting is actually what is now driving her motivation. A walk through her home studio bears out her words. More than 100 finished canvasses line the walls, the floor, and extend into the hallways and dining room. She says she paints all night since she cares for her ailing mother during the day.

But the sheer volume of paintings is not what captures your attention. I think Terry's brilliant, vivid, and intense colors and flowing shapes that seem to move are what call to you. Deep vibrant purples are paired with cooling turquoises, sizzling hot pinks give way to bright oranges, blues, and greens. Indigos are so deep you swear if you touched them you'd feel velvet. These are modernist paintings, and Terry says they all convey the newly found freedom she now has in her life, her health, and in her art. These works are different than her earlier known works, which, with the exception of her Wallscapes, consisted mostly of small, atypical watercolors of landscapes, animals, and native peoples.

"I have evolved—colors excite me," she says. "My paintings now have more depth, more color. They are more open and flowing." She now uses acrylics and paints on large canvasses, usually 4 feet by 5 feet or larger, and often paints flowing and color-saturated unexpected renditions of flowers or trees. Her paintings flow from her passion, she says.

Like Picasso, who had distinct periods in which he used completely different styles or colors, Terry also paints in what she calls "series." She remembers in her earlier years when she knew she was finished painting her watercolors. "I just knew," she says. As she was waiting for further inspiration, she experienced an artistic conversion as she drove past a California field of eye-catching poppies. She felt awash in color, Terry says, and instantly understood her new style, or series, would include vibrant colors.

Terry is now deep in her "dot" series, in which she creates vividly hued, three-dimensional nature-inspired paintings that take their forms completely from tiny dots shaken off her paintbrush. The dimensions are created by separate layers of pigment washes applied to her canvas in striking colors. When Terry is satisfied with the blending and melding of colors, she places her canvas flat on the floor and carefully taps her brush above it, applying tiny dots on her layers of color. The dots take on a life of their own, she says, and it is only when she is finished applying them that the painting reveals itself to her. With an additional swipe of her brush to add an elegant limb here, a trunk there, a tree suddenly appears in a field of color. "I never, ever have a real idea of what I will paint before I start," she says. "The painting happens on its own, and I follow it through."

Her dots grew out of "splatters," in which she would paint an oversized, intensely colored flower and, to complete the painting, she would in a controlled splatter, add an elegant jet black "seed pod." The elongated free-form pods seem to lend the paintings an entirely new element of character and sophistication.

Terry began painting as a small child, and remembers being especially encouraged by an art teacher at North High School in Denver. Terry's artistic talents eventually led to a one-year scholarship to the prestigious Arts Students' League of New York. Even so, Terry says she is mostly self-taught and her work has always been unique and completely original.

She does, however, share some striking similarities to a world-renowned painter. Her "red series" is a collection of flowing florals all done in intense reds, pinks, and whites. To me they seem somehow reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe. When I mention that Terry's paintings evoke the same feelings in me as O'Keeffe's work, she is not surprised. Like O'Keeffe, Terry's inspiration comes from nature, especially landscapes in New Mexico. Having been born in Brooklyn and having spent that year studying in New York, Terry feels she brings a fresh perspective of and deep appreciation for the vistas of the West, and seeks to convey that in her paintings.

Terry feels she has been healed through her art and when she is painting, she cannot separate herself from her work. "I go right into the paintings. They are part of me when I am doing them." She says that every painting is her best work—until she begins the next one. "I am so free and happy when I am painting," she says. Indeed, her colors are bold and strong, and her art seems to shout out her joy, peace, and passion. "They are windows into my spirit."

As her paintings show in Dublin, Terry is looking for galleries closer to home in which to exhibit her work. With paintings titled, "The Joy of Living," "The New Day," "Rebirth," and "Reaching," it seems Terry's focus is about embracing her life and moving forward, and like all comeback stories, is inspiring. "My goal is to be the greatest woman artist alive," she says, "and I know I can do it."

Contact Terry directly at artlady1945@aol.com or call 303-973-1888 for an appointment.