

Sandy Denis



“I’ve always been pretty much a juicy, bold color painter!” asserted Sandy Denis during our evening interview in her Charlemont painting studio. Canvases in this signature palette filled with birds, lambs, cows, rocky coastlines and tumbling blue surf lit up the walls around us. Sandy describes her choice of color and value as a strategy of where the eye goes in the composition according to color relationships.

“I had a wonderful opportunity to have a class with Wolf Kahn, he was great! He told us, 'Put one color down, then another, see how they interact, then when a third color comes in it's like a weaving, back and forth, which one dominates, which becomes background, back and forth', and for me, that's kind of how I feel.”

Another distinctive characteristic of her art is the combination of abstraction and realism in the composition. Detailed and skillful renderings of various subjects are contrasted by rectilinear sections of color, sometimes containing related motifs. She may also apply textured paper over an area of color to mute it and push it back.

Denis’s sure hand comes from a lifetime of making art. In grade school in the eastern part of Massachusetts, frequent train service to Boston meant art classes for young Sandy at the Museum School while mom went shopping on Saturday mornings. “I didn’t want to do anything else but art from that time on” admitted Sandy. After graduating high school, she attended Mass College of Art where she studied design and illustration with the practical goal of a career in commercial art. She was hired immediately by a design firm on Copley Square where she got to work on many interesting projects.

Here’s where this begins to sound like a short story from *Redbook* magazine: “I went on vacation to Canada and fell in love with my ski instructor!” The courtship progressed to marriage and she moved to Canada, working as a ski instructor. In Canada, it was the custom to do a week of skiing, and she got to know many of her students and their families further as they became clients for portraits as well. It was skiing that brought the couple back to Massachusetts when her husband was hired to

start the ski school at then Thunder Mountain (Berkshire East) in Charlemont. Sandy quickly became disenchanted with teaching day-trippers and turned back to the graphic arts for a while and raised her family.

Eventually Sandy turned to painting exclusively. She spent much time with fellow plein aire painters on the North Shore and Maine, especially Isle au Haute, and became expert with coastal scenes. However, one painting mentor pointed out that her practiced hand was a disability for a fine artist. "My hand is too sure, too confident sometimes" admits Sandy. "It's like I should paint with my left hand or something. Doing realistic things is so easy for me. But it's really a mental, not a physical process, and I keep trying to remember to back off a bit."



Julie Hall Rocke was Sandy's long time friend and was her first connection to the Shelburne Arts Coop. Sandy watched the very conscientious Julie struggle with trying to keep things organized during the initial start-up period and offered to help out with one caveat: no math! "It's a real bug-a-boo for me! I wouldn't do the cash register-no way! so we struck a deal--I would be the curator instead."

Julie gave her only one condition with the job assignment: make it look good! Of course, the politics of product positioning put Sandy in the cross hairs at times, and it was the sweetly diplomatic Julie who served to smooth things out. Curating may actually require more hours than the standard work shift would, but she finds the work satisfying and the coop has obviously benefitted enormously from her thoughtful table, shelf and window arrangements and wall displays that create a consistent and professional look.

Four painters are in the "Coastal" exhibit: Nina Coler, Louise Minks, and Sarah Holbrook are crashing waves with Sandy on the wall this month (only 7x4 feet each! noted the intrepid curator). A reception will be held on November 3rd from 3:00 to 5:00 PM.