

no ordinary ABSTRACTS

By Gayle Mavor
Photos by John Cameron

LAYERS OF LIFE AND PAINT IN THE ARTWORK OF SALT SPRING'S MICHELA SORRENTINO

Michela Sorrentino is a woman of transforming roles. From wife and mother to treasure hunter, collector, archaeologist, graphic designer, illustrator and finally an abstract artist, she is now able in mid-life to focus on what she has spent a lifetime yearning to do full-time — paint. Sometimes she's in the forest, wandering country lanes, picking at shorelines and on the 25 acres that she and her husband, Matteo Hermani, purchased in 1997 and moved to full time in 2000. It's high above Fulford Harbour.

Each found object from the natural environment becomes a possibility. History revisited steps in her imagination. Then, muted earthy colours — sometimes as many as 20 acrylic layers — get interrupted by an unexpected slash of red, yellow or trademark

turquoise. Repetitive ovals of all sizes are a constant theme like the ovoid in Northwest Coast art. Textures are eked out of layers upon layers, scratched with a nail, sanded, sometimes even with an electric sander. She calls it "mark making."

"When you scratch out you get surprises," she says.

Eventually they are born complete as abstracts on wooden exhibition panels, ranging in size from 24 by 36 inches to 12 by 60 inches.

Inspiration arises from bones, a feather, a fishing weight, seed pods, sand dollars, leaves, shells or the patina of a weathered leather boot. They're painted, then named as if she's labelling dreams. "Heavy cloud but no rain." "Nomads." "Lotto 07504." "One thousand beautiful things."

Entering their unfinished modern home through a unique slab door that tilts horizontally outwards is like opening a drawer into a box of secret treasures.

She has no studio, so her painting table, just inside the courtyard, half inside, half outside, is all brushes and paint drippings: red as blood, opaque as sweat, translucent as tears. She describes her process as very intuitive with no clear idea about where she's going.

"People tell me my work evokes emotions and memories: Childhood, beaches, holidays, experiences."

We sit at her children's plastic table and chair set. It's the only furniture on the patio positioned like a pause in a quiet conversation between the finished side of the long flat-roofed house her husband's been working on for 10 years and the incomplete opposite, framed and insulated, awaiting drywall.

Orcas Island in the San Juans floats on the ocean below as if on a topographical map. Her children, Sebastian, 10, and Julia, 8, busy themselves playing with a friend while she shows me a "visual

journal." The pages are exquisite in detail: vibrant colours, letterset letters, magazine clippings, stylized photos and natural artefacts; graphic recipes for some future visual feast.

This past year's "explosion of creativity" resulted in two shows. The first was called *Subliminal Meditations*, held at West Vancouver's Ferry Building Gallery in April with artist Angela Rae where she sold five pieces at the opening. Then in July, she was part of the *ArtCraft Showcase Gallery* exhibit at Salt Spring's Mahon Hall along with ceramic artist Byungjoo Suh.

Approaching the age of 50, she credits that "now or never" realization as playing a role in this year's prolific output. It also helped that Anna Gustafson and Paul Burke of Blue Horse Folk Art Gallery lent her their studio this past winter.

Born in Montreal, Sorrentino grew up in West Vancouver and began travelling in her late teens/early 20s.

After high school, she enrolled in a fine art program at North Vancouver's Capilano University (then a college), and then left for

Europe, auditing courses at the influential French art school, Les Beaux Arts. She attended ESMOD Paris, learning textile design and worked in textile design in Paris and Italy for mills that supplied Miroglio Textile in Northern Italy. Her work as a colour chooser focused on colour variation and harmony.

After 10 years in Europe she returned to Vancouver in 1990 and began designing for the Vancouver clothing lines Bravo Kids and Please Mum. She met her husband through friends and in 1994 learned computer skills from him, describing Hermani as “someone who can build their house or take apart and put back together a Jag with only one screw being different than when he started.”

Hermani + Sorrentino became not only a life partnership but a graphic design firm with clients in Canada and the U.S. from California to Washington, D.C. She’s the creative. He’s the technical.

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MICHELA SORRENTINO


Artistic focus runs in the family. Her father, Fulvio Sorrentino, is a retired Vancouver architect and her brother, Furio, is an art director for independent television.

Hired by a client to design a book jacket, she learned of Californian painter Nicholas Wilton (whose painting graces the cover of the best-selling book called *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz). In 2008, she took a course from him at Esalen Institute in Northern California. Wilton has been “the bridge that connected me from graphic design to painting,” she says. “He has urged and coached me to push past ‘designing’ my paintings and to let the paint speak for itself.”

After a tour of the completed side of the house, where I enjoy her collections, both artistic and natural — we take a short, steep climb to her design office. She punches a security code and we’re inside a galley-sized space dominated by a large computer monitor. She shows me *Alfabet A To Z – The Wonderful Words from Agriculture*, by Carol Watterson, that she illustrated. It’s published in Canada with rights just sold to a U.S. publisher.

On the way out I can’t resist pulling out one slim drawer in a multi-drawer cabinet. Inside, items are arranged as if in a museum cabinet like those from the ancient civilizations that have always fascinated her.

I’m struck by the name of one of her paintings: “No ordinary life.” It makes me wonder, as I take one last look around, if the title is an insight into how lucky she’s been in her own life or a realization that there is no such thing?

Visit her website at www.michela-sorrentino.com. 



Above and on the left side of the page: Tall vertical paintings by Michela Sorrentino. At left: Two samples of her “visual journals.” Pages 8 & 9: Sorrentino and cat Emi in her living room, artwork all around.