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March 16, 2015 7:12PM

### Lebanon's Julie Puttgen is living an artist's life

By Melanie Plenda

Special to the Union Leader



Julie Puttgen wasn't good at tennis. Or basketball, even though she was tall. She didn't want to be a lawyer or a doctor for that matter.

She just wanted to be an artist.

And while that looks good on paper, literally, in reality it's a tough sell as a career.

Yet, she's done it. At 43, this Lebanon painter has flourished as an artist in her own right and has gone on to teach hundreds how to be artists themselves previously as a professor and currently as a teacher holding private lessons and public workshops.



"Keeping the Hand In," an encaustic painting by Julie Puttgen.

That said, it was a long journey getting there. Puttgen was born in Switzerland and moved to the United States when she was young. Like a lot of people, she said, she knew as a little kid she wanted to be an artist.

"I would get really deeply absorbed in it, and I'd spend my time copying pictures from fashion magazines," she said. "And my family in general was very supportive of that."

Until she wanted to go to art school.

"They really weren't in favor of me doing



Julie Puttgen's fake knuckle tattoos make a statement in this self-portrait photo. Courtesy Photos



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that," she said. "They wanted me to get a degree that would allow me to become something socially useful like a social justice lawyer or a doctor."

As a compromise, she went to art school at Yale, where she earned her degree in fine art. When she graduated and saw that there were "zero studio art companies knocking on my door," she got a grant to go on a Buddhist pilgrimage that took her to Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand and Tibet.

"I really loved travelling in that way," she said of the pilgrimage. "I wanted to experience these places the way hundreds of years of people had, walking from this place to this place."

But everywhere she went, it was the art she was attracted to. She'd see a building, but it wasn't just a building — it was wood and work and something that clearly was put together by someone's hands. She walked the streets and over and over again get swept away by the hand-carved wood and handmade pottery that surrounded her. It was also during this trip that she studied meditation in Thailand, and that led her to join a Buddhist monastery.

"I was really drawn to the idea of living in a community," she said. "I trained in a community of people who came together committed to living out a life with a shared aspiration of spiritual freedom."

Once at the monastery, her life became about simplicity. Any belongings she had were donated, from the towels to the sheets. Her personal decisions in that way were made for her. Speaking for the most part was reduced down to functional communication rather than conversation.

Puttgen said she learned a lot about the natural world while she was there, but she also learned that the life of a Buddhist nun involves knowing that one should only do it as long as it's useful. And just before she was about to be fully ordained, she realized that it just wasn't that for her anymore.

"It was supposed to happen on the last full moon of 1999," she said. "My heart just really wasn't in it anymore. I couldn't make myself do this thing."

After three years, at 27, she was going back into the world. "I really had lost my home, my job, my religion, my family," she said. "I only knew to go forward and to do that I had to go back. I had to be in a relationship, gradually work things out with my family and make art."

She had it in mind to go back to school to be an art therapist until, she said, "It occurred to me that after three years in a monastery, I might not have the kinds of life experience that would be relevant to that job," she said with a laugh.

She did go back to school and got her master of fine art degree from Georgia State University, in



"Crescent Moon Reaching" is one of Julie Puttgen's encaustic paintings.



"Say the Names" is one of Julie Puttgen's encaustic paintings. Courtesy

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drawing, painting and printmaking. Shortly after, she began teaching college-level art classes.

As she observed her students and their work, she noticed it all was just too easy for them. They didn't need to really get in there and work at it. They never had to deal with tools or get their bodies and muscles and time into their work.

Puttgen was going to change that. She had been exposed at some point along the way to a painting style known as encaustic, which uses pigments mixed with hot wax that are burned in as an inlay.

"It's wax-based so it smells great, and you can do all kinds of things with it. You can carve it and really dig into it and embed artifacts," she said. "It's very process intensive and very physical. ... And to work with it, my students were going to have to get good at working with tools."

She went to the administration at the college, and through her enthusiasm and a stroke of luck, was able to persuade them to install a whole encaustic lab.

"My predecessor was a total hypochondriac, so the entire space was already properly ventilated," she said. "So it was totally safe, and the school didn't have to add any ventilation. It was just like this amazing conjunction of things."

When she was finally able to unveil it to her students, she saw the transformative power it had. They were working at it. They were physically coming at their paintings, getting involved and really working at them. The process is something that she still teaches today in her Just So Studio and at other classes in the Upper Valley.

"Each student brings to it his or her own life experience," she said. "I'll have students who are hesitant at first, maybe this is their first art class and they're not sure what to do. But they keep coming back and they keep at it and keep working on it. And they bring things to it and do things with it that I never even thought of. ... It's amazing, they find ways to it that no one's ever done before."

As for her own work, Puttgen imbues it with the lessons she learned cloistered away all those years ago. She brings to her work the Buddhist ideals of impermanence and compassion. Through her work she searches for the things that bind us all together, she said.

For an exhibit on display at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, she created images of hands. To complete the project, she conducted interviews asking people what makes them free and then photographed their hands. She later went back and drew the hands and wrote up a combination of their own personal stories and memories as well as some added touches of her own invention.

"I wanted to invite people into the lives of others, and I think reading the first person narratives of other people's lives, people get really connected," she said.

Puttgen went on to be the first encaustic artist to be juried into the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen. She also kept to the plan she made when she left the monastery. She's married and has a dog, mended fences with family and does art.

"There's a certain courage you need to keep coming back to art. Art is just not valued (as a career) in our culture. Think about it, the pay is terrible. If you decide to be trained, the training is really expensive. And then once you have that, you have to try to find work. There are so many kind of obstacles," Puttgen said.

"But I continue to come back to it. ... I do what I do because I love it, and I know I'm good at it. My work is something only I can do in the way that I do it. I know it's what I need to do."

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