

'I'm talking to you about light'

Chapel Hill, North Carolina painter Jane Filer speaks loud and clear on canvas

By DIANE DANIEL, Correspondent

CHAPEL HILL -- As the birds and insects vied for airtime on a simmering summer afternoon, Jane Filer sat barefoot behind the easel in her back yard and sweated over another painting.

The sweat was literal -- beads of moisture sparkling on her top lip and dotting her face. And it was figurative -- the artist on round two of a painting that includes a large blue house and even larger angular blue donkey.

The painting is typical of Filer's distinctive style. It crackles with color, swirls with spirit and sets a tone that is light and dark, joyful and contemplative. Her penchant for mythical creatures and fantastical objects brings to mind Paul Klee and Marc Chagall.

Filer pointed to the left of the painting-in-progress, saying, "I had a lady over here and a guy here. It was a half-day's work, and then I painted it out. You can't get too attached to your hard work."

Not that detachment comes easy.

"Sometimes, I feel like I could pull my hair out over every tiny bit," said Filer, a tall woman whose shoulder-length auburn hair morphs from tight ringlets to light frizz.

"Some people ask, 'How do you know when it's done? I say. 'When you love every little inch of it.' "



Staff Photos by John Rottet

Chapel Hill artist Jane Filer, working at home, is preparing for a solo show.



'I want to tantalize your feelings, your sense of sight, and touch, and see if the subject matter will stir up something inside of you,' says painter Jane Filer. She holds an MFA from UNC-Chapel Hill.

A lot of people seem to love every little inch of Filer's otherworldly abstract paintings.

At her last solo show two years ago at Tyndall Galleries in Chapel Hill, all two dozen paintings she had delivered sold within a week. Most were priced between \$2,200 and \$4,000, with some as low as \$600 and others as high as \$5,400.

That's an occurrence many artists and gallery owners can only dream of. By the end of that five-week exhibit, Filer had created, delivered and sold an additional 10 paintings.

Since then, Filer, 48, has kept on selling, whether through her handful of galleries or by word of mouth. In July, she put sales on hold in order to stock up for her next show, which opens Wednesday at Tyndall Galleries. Again, Filer will add fresh paintings throughout the show, which ends Oct. 1.

"We're expecting a blockbuster show," said gallery owner Jane Shuping Tyndall, who counts Filer among her most popular artists.

As a regional gallery, Tyndall doesn't have the national clout to give Filer greater exposure, something the artist would like but has not pushed for on her own.

"I think she's ready to take off nationally," Tyndall said. "It takes getting your work in big cities. The way

that people absolutely adore her work, why wouldn't it happen to Jane?"

Filer's fan base includes scores of former and current students from her two decades of teaching at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro. She has such a following that students put together a class show called "Mornings With Jane."

What is it that attracts so many art lovers and buyers?

"I could talk with you about her color and composition, which are incredible," Tyndall said. "But for me, Jane Filer's work is the spirit and imagination that is beyond what you see on the canvas. It's in Jane Filer. It's some sort of thing -- incredible, spontaneous, spiritual, filled with joy, that comes through in her paintings. They are very alive."

Filer said she pours those emotions onto the canvas.

"I'm not necessarily depicting anything, but I'm talking to you about light and color and texture," said Filer, who has sparkling eyes, a sing-song voice and unbridled enthusiasm. "I want to tantalize your feelings, your sense of sight and touch, and see if the subject matter can't stir up inside of you. I'm trying to be as truthful as I can. All I wonder about, all that I think, all that I feel, all that I know, all that I don't know, I want it to come in.

"The viewer doesn't have to know what it's about. They get the feeling."

In fact, she doesn't always get it herself, she said, pointing to a painting that features cats flying over a scene, which she had completed during an art retreat this year in Virginia.

"There were these wild cats there, and they inspired me. But why I put wings on them, I don't know," she said.

There are two things that get Filer's dander up.

One is when her work, which could visually fit into the folk art category, is called "primitive" or "naive."

"It's not primitive, and I'm not an untrained artist," said Filer, who has a master's in fine arts from UNC Chapel Hill.

The other is when people say, "it's so whiiiiimsical," she said with a mock Southern drawl.

She appreciates it, however, when viewers, despite seeing exuberant and painstakingly rich colors several layers deep, recognize "something kind of dark."

"That's right. That's life. Scary," she said in a tone more pragmatic than fearful.

Perhaps it's pragmatism that has kept Filer going over the past several decades.

She put herself through college, at Southern Illinois University, and won a prestigious award that paid for graduate school. She and her husband, John Filer, decided Chapel Hill would be a good place to live, so she attended UNC. She was awarded an MFA in 1985.

James Gadson, one of Filer's former art professors and a painter himself, said her individualism was notable.

"So many students wanted to find out what was hot; she was interested in finding out what she wanted to do, what was important to her," said Gadson, who last saw Filer at her 2003 show. "She enjoys her own work, and she's not always looking over her shoulder. I'm excited about her success as an artist."

After graduate school, Filer painted as much as she could, confident in her ability to make good art but not necessarily good money.

Before she and John built their rustic house on the 16 acres Filer calls "my little hole in the woods," they lived there in a camper. "I painted on a picnic table," she said.

John Filer, a consulting forester, has become an important part of her art career, building all her frames and stretchers, photographing her work and maintaining her Web site (www.janefiler.com). Filer also has two

assistants to help with small basics, such as preparing canvasses.

Linda Carmel, who organized the student show in part to honor her teacher, said Filer "gives you permission to think you can do it. She's a very warm, open person. I'm really grateful that she's carrying on the teaching."

Filer herself looks for guidance from "the hugging saint," Mata Amritanandamayi, or Amma, as she's known to her followers.

"She's my spiritual teacher," said Filer, who has photos of Amma in her indoor and outdoor studios. Last month, she spent several days near Boston at a

retreat led by the world-famous Indian mystic, who preaches love and compassion. Armed with a new meditation ritual, Filer returned home recharged.

The once-struggling artist has raised her prices slightly each year, and she said that in some ways she feels bad about being too expensive for some folks.

Then, smiling, she added, "But they had their chance. I've experienced the poor part. Now, it's time for the abundance part. People are buying the things I want to paint. How cool is that, man?"

Diane Daniel can be reached at askdianedaniel@aol.com

Diane has recently moved to The Netherlands with her husband Wessel and Filer painting, right.



"Orange County Nature Spirits"

26"x 26" acrylic on canvas