

Virmarie Suria DePoyster



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(Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Cary Jenkins)

Artist extraordinaire Virmarie DePoyster had a sheltered childhood in Puerto Rico before coming to El Dorado. The culture shock, combined with the language barrier, gave her a drive to do better and better.

KIMBERLY DISHONGH
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Natural light pours into Virmarie DePoyster’s North Little Rock corner studio, illuminating artwork, trays of colorful pastels, cups of brushes and tubes and bottles of paint. Crumpled paper towels, used but with plenty of purpose left, stacks of masking tape strips used to “erase” pastels that would merely disperse if rubbed, and a few empty water bottles also inhabit the perfectly imperfect space.

Petite in stature but with a big, warm, vibrant personality, DePoyster welcomes visitors to see some of what she sees — and gently queries whether she might see some of what they see as well.

DePoyster, who was awarded the 2024 Governor’s Award in Art and Education from the Arkansas Arts Council, considers

the labels we attach to people, and the labels she attaches to herself.

“I’ve been labeled ‘flaky,’ because that’s what people think about artists,” DePoyster says. “It comes across as judgment.”

DePoyster’s contemplation led to the creation of a collection, “Beyond Labels,” on exhibit at Fort Smith Regional Art Museum.

She invited people into her North Little Rock studio for interviews and then did their portraits, asking them for three adjectives they would use to describe themselves and suggesting they bring items important to them as props.

“Because it couldn’t just be happening to me. Surely other people were being labeled,” she says. “I started with myself.”

For her own self-portrait, DePoyster draped an American flag around her shoulders.

DePoyster was 15 when she came to America. She holds close the memory of brilliant illustrations she saw on the pages of a children’s Bible, turned as she and her sisters sat on twin beds the night before, left behind when they departed their home in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico, on a journey to El Dorado, the next day.

“We had some friends in El Dorado — he was a family practice doctor — and he had a room upstairs nobody was using,” says DePoyster, one of three daughters born to a strict Pentecostal minister who was left behind in Puerto Rico.

DePoyster’s father had not allowed her or her sisters to watch television or listen to the radio, except for Christian programming.

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I entertained myself, and I think that those things carry over into what I do today because I’m able to spend lots of time alone and just keep myself busy,” she says.

She remembers watching “Rambo” on the plane from Puerto Rico, unhampered by her inability to understand the language.

“It was great because there was a lot of action and he didn’t talk very much so it was perfect,” she says.

CULTURE SHOCK

She was stricken by the lack of color around her new home.

“You know, in Puerto Rico you have iguanas and palm trees and you have houses that are all different kinds of colors,” she says. “There’s just color everywhere. So imagine coming to El Dorado, Arkansas, where every house is red brick. It was definitely a shock to my system.”

DePoyster

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In Puerto Rico, she enjoyed drawing, cross-stitching and sewing and she helped paint backdrops for theater productions.

In Arkansas, she struggled to master subjects in classes where she could not understand what the teachers were saying.

"I had a dictionary that I carried around and I translated every other word," she says.

Her mother, who was bilingual, taught Spanish at the local high school, and DePoyster and her sisters rode to and from school with her each day.

"I remember that I took odd jobs around the neighborhood, cleaning people's houses. We only had the one car and so I would walk places. It just made me really want to not have to do that again. It gave me a sense of grit to want to work, to succeed so that I can do better and be better."

She got a job cutting fabric in a fabric store. When she wanted a sewing machine to make her own clothes, a benefactor took her to a bank so she could apply for a loan for a \$300 sewing machine.

"He felt like it was a teaching moment," she says. "All of those things made me very mindful of money and work and made me who I am."

The man also bought a car for her and her sister and paid for them to go to Hendrix College in Conway.

"It was this humongous car, this tank of a car — it was gray and rectangular — and he felt like it would be safe for us," she says. "My sister is short and she would have to put a pillow underneath so she could see over the steering wheel and we would drive to Hendrix and we would park really far away so nobody would see that we were driving that thing."

DePoyster transferred to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, where she completed a bachelor's degree in fashion design and merchandising in 1990. She moved to Little Rock then and worked first in retail, and then took a job designing business forms.

"Then I got married and had kids and those babies just cried all the time," she says. "I needed to be around people, and I was always creative, so I ended up signing up for classes at the Arkansas Arts Center."

WORKING WITH PASTELS

In March 2000, because she had paid for the classes, she committed to putting aside household chores and focus on art techniques.

"I fell in love with mark making and I just loved pastels," she says.

DePoyster started using pastels when her children — Grant and Anna, both now grown — were small.

Pastels, she explains, do not dry up. She could work on her art, leave it to do something else, and then resume her work whenever she was ready, without having to clean paint brushes and palettes and start over.

DePoyster honed her craft and taught classes at the Arts Center for seven years, finding ways to engage both novice and more experienced artists simultaneously.

Then she became intrigued by an opening at the The BridgeWay, a mental health hospital in North Little Rock.



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"They wanted an art teacher to come into the units and do classes with the patients," she says. "I started trying to look at ways in which I could teach people how to create a coping skill."

She showed patients how playing with colors on paper could allow them to reroute their thinking.

Jamie Higgins, director of development with Community Service Inc., says DePoyster created a curriculum to help with at-risk youth from 25 counties served by that organization.

He had met her while doing fundraisers for art scholarships at Pulaski Technical College. DePoyster, a volunteer, helped him with events.

"Later I saw an opportunity through the Arkansas Arts Council to receive grant funding to do art therapy, and I immediately contacted Virmarie because I thought that she would be a great fit in working with kids and instilling good techniques on how to deal with anxiety and depression," Higgins says. "She just really took that idea and developed a wonderful program. She did it from scratch."

DePoyster's lessons ended with having students draw in their sketchbooks, and she encouraged them to go back to those sketches when they felt anxious or upset to remember times when they felt happy.

"Nothing is 100% of course," he says. "But Virmarie is really easy to connect with. She is a good communicator and she developed connections with the clients and they responded really well to the program."

That was about 10 years ago, he says, and though De-

Poyster is no longer directly involved, the staff still uses parts of the program she created.

"She has got a big heart. She is not very tall or big in stature but she makes up for it with her big heart and passion," Higgins says. "She loves helping others and when she does that, with her talent, she just really shines."

SELF PORTRAITS

Another Arkansas Arts Council grant allowed DePoyster to work with eighth-graders at Butterfield Trail Middle School in Van Buren for two weeks on a unit, "Immigration: Stories of Yesterday and Today." The students interpreted 19th-century political cartoons and used them to create a butterfly-inspired collage reflecting on unity and migration, and they learned the immigration stories of various notable people. They created a mural with portraits of Hispanic immigrants, and they did self-portraits as well.

Ashleigh Gillespie was a teacher at Butterfield Trail.

"I feel like at that level there starts to be so much anxiety about creating self-portraits and looking at your face because they had to draw the lines around their eyes and their eyebrows and all of that," Gillespie says. "But she was able to make it to where we were celebrating parts of ourselves."

DePoyster had spent a year working on an exhibit that was installed at a gallery in Springdale at the beginning of March 2020, when the covid pandemic lockdowns began. "My husband and I went and hung the show because we couldn't be around any-

body else. It hung in the dark for three months and then we took it down and brought it home," she says. "I was in a real funk because I realized I had no control over anything. I spent a year of my life working on this and it was sitting in the dark."

The experience changed her, as it changed so many.

"Before covid, my work, all of my colors were really bright and bold and beautiful," she says. "I don't think I was depressed. I just felt like I was in this funk. Suddenly, really bright colors, it was almost like they bothered my eyes and I really didn't want to look at them. I didn't find them peaceful."

She created pieces then in toned down colors, letting shapes emerge from the pigment she put on the paper and then turning them into images.

"That seemed to give me a lot of respite," she says.

DePoyster noticed that over time, as their health improved, the students she worked with at The BridgeWay began to choose different color palettes.

"They would be painting in certain colors and then once they were there for a few weeks their colors changed and then they were getting better, but I had never experienced that myself," DePoyster says.

The pieces she created during that time are in a collection called "Holding Space."

"It has a lot of the work that's a more calming and soothing palette. It's completely different," she says. "Along the way, I kind of got into that, and then I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I gotta go

SELF PORTRAIT

Virmarie DePoyster

■ **PLACE OF BIRTH:** Hato Rey, Puerto Rico

■ **AN ARTIST I ADMIRE IS:** Sonya Clark — I saw her solo exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and she inspired me to do more.

■ **MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORY:** We had a small farm in rural Puerto Rico with rows and rows of plantains and bananas. I loved digging the holes with my dad to plant them. When it was time to harvest, he let me pick which ones to cut down.

■ **THE BEST PART OF MY DAY:** Meditating.

■ **I LIKE TO EAT:** An arugula mustard sandwich for breakfast or rice and eggs!

■ **SOMETHING I ALWAYS LIKE TO HAVE NEARBY:** Spanish guitar music, paper towels and masking tape.

■ **I START MY DAY BY:** Drinking three cups of strong Puerto Rican-style coffee and watching the birds in my backyard.

■ **MY FAMILY WOULD SAY:** I am tenacious, caring, hard-working, spunky!

■ **SOMEDAY, I WANT TO:** Live by a creek.

■ **THE BEST ADVICE I EVER GOT WAS:** Every step is a miracle, every breath is a miracle.

■ **I LOVE ART THAT:** Is thought-provoking and makes me curious.

■ **I WISH EVERYONE WOULD:** Realize that curiosity is one of the great secrets of happiness.

■ **MY BIGGEST PET PEEVE:** People that don't help carry the load.

■ **SOMETHING FEW PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT ME (BUT I WISH THEY DID):** I grew up without TV or radio, so I learned how to entertain myself easily. Today, I still don't watch much TV, and over the years, I learned to enjoy music.

■ **ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP:** Determined

back to color."

DePoyster's friend Kim Kernodle has one of DePoyster's paintings, commissioned by her husband as a gift for Christmas last year, in her living room in Fayetteville.

"It's of silos in northeast Arkansas, where my husband is from," Kernodle says. "It's just really beautiful. There are lots of blues and yellows and grays."

Kernodle and DePoyster met while living in Pomfret Hall at the University of Arkansas.

She was impressed by DePoyster's sewing skills.

"It wasn't like something that people would look at and go, 'That looks homemade,'" she says. "It just looked like things that you would buy at the store."

A GENEROUS SPIRIT

MaryRoss Taylor, president of the board of the Arkansas Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, met DePoyster, who sits on the board, in 2019.

Taylor also uses the word "spirited" to describe DePoyster.

"She takes on a lot. But she takes it on in an extremely generous, spirited way, out of a desire to make opportunities and recognition for other people," she says. "That's a very charming attribute. Artists generally don't get a lot of attention and it can be hard for them to put themselves out to put attention on other people, because you get rejected an awful lot — anybody does, no matter how good."

Artists' work is sometimes only on display for a few weeks every couple of years, Taylor says.

"I've been struck by her generous spirit, and I think you see it in the way she talks about her own work, too, and her desire to make work that's a recognition of regular people going about their regular lives," Taylor says. "She's very warm. She's a charmer."

Cindy Wallace met DePoyster in the parking lot of a mother's day out when their children were young enough to go there.

"They're 29 now," Wallace says. "We became the best of friends. Every day when we would pick up our kids from school we would sit in the vehicle together and talk about life."

DePoyster taught her to make jewelry, and she made some for her when she was facing health problems.

"She was like, 'Oh, you need to wear this necklace. It will make you feel pretty and it will make you feel better,'" Wallace says. "I would wear it even on the days that I felt the worst because it did make me feel better, and pretty."

They took a pottery class together.

"It was hilarious, for my part. Hers was over there looking all beautiful and mine not so much," she says.

During the pandemic, DePoyster took her home-baked bread.

"She's great at cooking, and she made lots of bread during that time for lots of people because she's very creative and she needed that outlet," Wallace says.

Wallace poked fun at DePoyster recently about the crumpled paper towels and bits and bobs that occupy her creative space, and DePoyster responded with a comical video posted on Instagram, rebuffing her label of hoarder. Wallace feels fortunate to be a part of her friend's life.

"I'm lucky now that she's had a studio, because a lot of times I get a little peek of the greatness," she says. "I love that time period that we have together, that she trusts me to look at it and to listen to my feelings about it, and knowing that I'm not going to say anything about it to anybody. I always can't wait to see what the end is going to look like, and it's always better than I can even imagine."