

Bright artist enjoys practicing her passion

By CARA BONNETT
Guest Writer

Hasie Sirisena stands at the easel, her dark hair tied back in a bright turquoise headband, her jeans splattered with colors from past works. She's been working on this particular painting for two weeks, painstakingly layering greens and golds and reds in search of the perfect shade.

She steps back from the wet canvas, studying it intently. Brushing away a stray wisp of hair, she leaves a track of green paint across her cheek. An occupational hazard, she explains with a smile. She doesn't own a piece of clothing that's not stained with paint somewhere.

At the semester's end, Sirisena, a senior art major at UNC-CH, will have eight paintings to show for her hours of labor at the easel. And she will have the satisfaction of artistic accomplishment. "It's different from being a poli-sci major or an English major," she says. "In art, what you have to show at the end is something you've produced. You've incorporated your knowledge and changed it into your own experience. In a way, you become the painting, just like an actor becomes a character or a musician becomes the piece of music he plays. It gets confusing sometimes."

She once again turns her attention to the canvas. Around her, other student artists struggle over their own canvases, and the thick smell of turpentine dominates. The painting professor wanders from one easel to the next, his comments rare, his praise rarer. An hour from now, the painting room will empty, and Sirisena will put away her brushes until the class' next three-hour session. But for the

moment, everything outside the boundaries of the canvas is secondary. Such is the education of an artist.

Sirisena knew since she was 10 that her drawing talent could lead her to a career in art. Teachers in high school encouraged her, but her parents insisted she get a college degree, "to have something to fall back on." While no one ever told her not to be an artist, "most people just humored me. My mother thought painting was something people did as a hobby. I don't know. Maybe now they're just humoring someone who's 21."

She started college majoring in radio, television and motion pictures, aiming for a career in filmmaking. She didn't sign up for her first art class until her junior year. "I denied it because it was so painful. Painting is so close to me, and I was scared of being vulnerable. Finally, I took a drawing class and I told myself, 'Maybe I'll change my major — but only if I get an A.' I got an A. Then I took a painting class, and I said, 'Maybe I'll stay in the department — but only if I make an A.' I made a B plus. I stayed anyway. At some point, you have to admit, 'This is what I am.'"

She hasn't regretted the decision. "You don't know how nice it is," she grins, "to walk into a building with paint on your jeans and have nobody stare at you."

"I don't think people who aren't artists understand the appeal. Doing art is living on the wire, with a lot of passion and love. A lot of people don't understand passion, or they're jealous or disgusted by it. Then there are the people who say, 'That's just the way Hasie is.'"

Women in the past weren't supposed to have passion at all, she points out. Sirisena identifies in particular

with Mary Cassatt, an "eccentric" 19th-century painter who turned down several marriage proposals because she dedicated so much time and passion to her art. "I see in her a woman who made a choice to be alone, and I don't think she ever regretted it," Sirisena says. "I don't know how she made the decision. Either she wasn't playing with a full deck or she was very brave. But if there were women like that then, there certainly can be women like

over the last few months. "My work always comes directly from my life," says Grabowski, whose first child is due this winter. "Now that I'm pregnant, I find myself making birth pieces." She gestures at a nearby canvas on the wall. "There's a big vagina. It just happened."

Like Sirisena, Grabowski didn't start off in art. Instead, she majored in architecture at the University of Virginia. She began to maintain her own studio as an artist after she graduated.

"Most people just humored me. My mother thought painting was something people did as a hobby. I don't know. Maybe now they're just humoring someone who's 21."

— Hasie Sirisena, UNC art major

that now."

Beth Grabowski is one of Sirisena's role models. Grabowski, an assistant professor in UNC-CH's studio art department, is one of the few women in the state earning a national reputation for herself as a printmaker and painter. Her work was shown in 12 exhibitions last year.

Tracing paper, tools and metal cans filled with brushes cover every flat surface in Grabowski's studio. Against one wall are framed prints ready to be sent to Los Angeles for a national exhibition. Half-finished works adorn the other walls.

Women's issues have always served as a main subject for her art, but she's noticed some changes in her work

"You need to do something on your own like that to prove to yourself that the drive is there. As a student, you're learning a lot about art and you have some good ideas, but you're structured by the school. Your deadlines are set by other people."

Education doesn't teach women artists the economic realities either. Less than 5 percent of the artists in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York are women. Even smaller galleries are reluctant to exhibit female artists' work, especially if it tackles issues such as lesbianism.

"Men call a higher price and earn more respect," Grabowski says. "When gallery owners are looking for an investment, they go with the sure thing, and the system perpetuates itself. It takes a brave person to stake out the unknown and make a political statement, and it is still a political statement to exhibit women artists." She is quick to point out that most of the shows in which she has won awards were juried by women.

Sirisena knows she will face discrimination. Even now, though most of her classmates in the art department are female, most of the names she memorizes in her art history classes are male.

"There's always been the myth of the male genius who overcame all odds to become an artist," Sirisena says. "That's not true. Men have always had more advantages, and women are fighting a well-established attitude that people don't question. I realized early on that it was going to be hard for someone who's a woman and who's not white to be an artist in America."

But that just increases her determination. "I can't spend my life saying, 'I can't do this because someone said I can't.' I probably have no idea how hard it will be. But it might be quite easy. You never know."

Her biggest challenge, she says, is not to overcome discrimination, but to better understand the self she seeks

to express. "I paint about being Hasie. I don't want to be someone who beats people over the head with the fact that I'm a woman, Asian and oppressed. I don't want attention for that because there's so much else in my life. I'm a whole person. And what I love about doing something non-verbal is that it gives me a beautiful, subtle way to be a person."

In the meantime, she devotes at least 50 hours a week to her art. Many nights she doesn't leave the art building until late, going home exhausted and short-tempered. "Art isn't an admirable thing a lot of the time," she says. "People think of it as self-centered, self-indulgent, and it is. When you're doing art, you can't let other parts of your life interfere. If you're concentrating, you can't pay attention to other people in your life."

To add to the difficulty, she faces a tough transition from the creative, physical world of the canvas to the verbal world outside. "It's a struggle trying to talk to people right after I leave the art room," she says. "I find that I talk less to people all around because I've found another way to talk."

Often other artists are the only ones who understand. One of Sirisena's close friends, Ruth Ann Woodley, is a piano performance major in the UNC-CH music department. Though the two work in different areas, they speak the same language when it comes to art, Woodley says.

"I look at any painting and I'm clueless," Woodley admits. "Still I think music and art are just different aspects of the same thing. There's something in you, and you can put it on the canvas or play it on the piano. If you're lucky enough to find a passion, you'll find other people who have it, too. Hasie and I talk a lot about times when we've really captured something well, or when we've communicated something so that somebody got it. Those are the two classes of great experiences, and she understands."

The two also share a common fear of failure. As Woodley describes it, "When my teacher's sitting there, five inches away, expecting me to produce emotion, I get scared. If he says, 'Make me cry,' and I can't make him cry, I'll feel stupid for trying."

But fear of failure hasn't stopped Sirisena yet. "What is success in art anyway?" she asks. "Selling a painting for a million dollars or doing something you're happy with? Other artists might make more money or get more recognition, but you can't judge life on a 1 to 10 scale like that."

"Some people leave art school and become famous right away. Other people don't get famous until they're in their 50s. Some people die and become famous. Some people never become famous. You can't go by that. I just need to be the most honest person I can be. It's a constant struggle, but then, you ought to struggle in your life to be better than what you are."



DTH/Grant Halverson

Freedom of speech. Censorship. Jesse Helms. All these things are topics of "Extremely Visible: Art and Artifacts of the Helms Era," on exhibit in the Union Gallery through Saturday, Nov. 17. Increase Maready uses Xerox as her medium in this work, titled "Posters." A constant flow of observers discuss and debate the works of Maready and the many other artists featured in the exhibit.