

SUNDAY

BAY LIVING

✓ Art and Artists - 1990

'This is how it had to be. I couldn't separate my life and my art.'

A world of imagination

Success comes quickly for artist Laurie Zeszut

By PEGGY R. TOWNSEND
Sentinel staff writer

THE ROOMS in Laurie Zeszut's paintings are filled with huge flowers, fat chairs and odd wallpaper.

Furniture is painted in fanciful patterns. A rooster perches on a lampshade. Walls bend at strange angles. The paintings look surreal.

Until you see her house.

Because when you walk through the front door of her home, you understand Zeszut's art. For inside you will find overstuffed chairs in Crayola colors, a fruit bowl filled with old croquet balls, a tea set draped in confetti streamers and vases of flowers.

"This is how it had to be. I couldn't separate my life and my art," said Zeszut, curled up in an armchair that looks like something straight out of "Pee Wee's Playhouse" — all fat and lumpy and painted in bright blue and red colors.

"Being an artist isn't a little part of me. It's the way I do my whole life."

Recently, the way Zeszut does life paid off.

The longtime stay-at-home mom; the woman who used to hand paint all the wrapping paper for her kids' birthday parties; the woman who still answers the phone for her family's moving business has hit the big time.

She has signed an exclusive contract with Martin Lawrence Limited galleries, one of the nation's largest art publishing houses.

Soon her works will be reproduced in limited-edition prints selling for \$1,000 each and her originals will sell for three to four times that amount.



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ZESZUT'S HOUSE sits off Branciforte Drive, across a tiny creek.

It is a weathered wood house with a jumble of rusting wagon wheel rims, pancake turners and fans nailed to the front wall and two huge, hairy dogs on the porch.

Untended flowers lean over a path of stepping stones. A scarred black cat sleeps on a metal lawn chair.

And inside, is the house that Zeszut collected.

"My family says I should not be left alone," said Zeszut with a laugh, as she leads a visitor on a tour of her house, past walls painted in pink diamonds and a desk covered with splats of color, past cookie cutters that hang in the window like Christmas decorations.

"They say I should always be supervised."

Zeszut is a compact woman whose short dark hair is laced with gray and who wears her daughter's shoes when she wants to dress up.

Experts call her work "evolved" and "sophisticated," but Zeszut will be the first to tell you her only training was a few art classes and that she paints the way she does because she has to answer the phone a lot and doesn't have much "quiet time."

She also will tell you she didn't start out to be an artist.

The second oldest in a family of eight children, Zeszut said that, like most Catholic girls, she wanted to be a nun for a long time.

But then, she decided she wanted to be a mom, and for 20 years she was just that.

She cooked meals, hauled her four kids to art classes and soccer practices, and cleaned house.

In between she worked the phones for the family business while her longtime partner, Pete Gonzales (who she has *not* been married to for 21 years), hauled the furniture. But even then, there was the spark of the artist.

She did the scenery for her kids' plays and painted a graduation mural.

And her house was always the way it is — a place for rocks and shells and old wire, not unlike a kindergarten's pockets.



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Laurie Zeszut's works soon will be available in limited edition prints, selling for \$1,000 each.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Art and life become one

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Her talent was spotted by artist and county Arts Commission staffer Liz Lindsley about six years ago.

"I saw someone who was creative in terms of their living space — from how she served her meals to how she created wrapping paper," said Lindsley.

So she invited Zeszut to a watercolor group she had formed and there, as Zeszut approached age 40 and her children needed her less, the artist blossomed.

"I always was so excited by the time Thursday rolled around," said Zeszut of those watercolor gatherings, "I would think about what I was going to wear and always show up all dressed up, like I was going to a love affair.

"The amount of my enthusiasm for this little Thursday afternoon group was almost comical."

Her first works were pretty, but timid, watercolors that still hang in the hallway of her house.

"Look how small I signed my name," she said with a smile, bending to the scene of flowers and trees.

"I can still remember the day I brought them down" for a show at the Art League, said Zeszut. "My knees were knocking so hard I almost couldn't walk from the car to the building."

Then, one day, one of her children brought home a school project — a colorful chalk drawing on

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black paper.

"It just really struck me," said Zeszut, "so I bought some black paper" and started experimenting with an opaque watercolor called gouache.

It worked she said because, unlike watercolor which need to be layered, this didn't need to be. She could do it in between phone calls and kids' questions.

Those bright colors would become her trademark.

ZESZUT ALWAYS paints standing up at the dining room table.

She pushes back the chairs and candlesticks, makes sure the dishes are done and the house is clean, and then goes to work, sometimes turning out a painting in three hours.

"I just lay my paper flat and usually just draw out the whole thing, then I fill in the spaces like a kid

does in a coloring book," said Zeszut.

For inspiration, she cuts out pictures of furniture from Architectural Digest and House Beautiful.

"I just put in things I would like to have in a room," said Zeszut, standing in front of a recent painting that includes a room filled with a grand piano, candelabras, big pillows and oriental rugs.

"It's just an imaginary world."

Or sometimes, she uses real life. Like the painting called "Country Living" that includes a rooster perched on a living room lamp shade.

"He got in somehow and we couldn't get him out all day," said Zeszut of the rooster. "He just stayed on the lampshade."

"She has a style which is not seen out there," said Teresa Coufal, assistant to the president of Martin Lawrence galleries in Van Nuys.

"She has quickly reached a level

that is really quite evolved and compositionally very sophisticated."

The company, she said, has not signed a new artist since 1990 when the recession put the squeeze on the art market.

"If I were an artist being signed with a publisher in these times, I would feel very good about myself," said Coufal.

ZESZUT CALLS herself a "re-discovering perfectionist," a woman, who at age 45 is re-discovering who she is.

"In the last five or six years, I have been actively undoing all the philosophies I just swallowed whole," said Zeszut, sitting under one of her paintings. "Things like the Catholic religion, our education system and what mom and dad taught me was valuable."

It is her time of rebellion, she said. Her time to redefine herself.

Her works are like a journal for this rediscovery, she said.

"I think it's her time to do what she needs to do to complete her life," said her 16-year-old daughter, Abby Gonzalez.

"She's not 'not there' for us now, but it's just her turn.

"I'm very proud of her." "Picasso said something about everybody having a sun in their belly," said Zeszut, looking out over the field of grass by her home.

"I have to let mine shine out."