

## Artist Profile: The Evolving Watercolorist [and her Students]



Liz Bulkley  
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*"With watercolor, you put most of your time coming up with your subject. Because if you don't get that right and you don't get the beginning part of it right then your painting will never come off."*

Those are likely obvious facts to an accomplished artist. Kathy Hanson is one of those and spent most of her career working in clay creating bold shapes and bright colors. About a decade ago, the way opened for her to develop her next passion which is she says, when she "went to paper." That means she started painting watercolors. I ask her if she were a potter yearning to be free as a painter and she begins to talk about what a natural easy transition it was for her. She adds "I just got one foot wet." That makes me laugh inside because we're talking about watercolor which depends heavily on the wise use of water, if not feet.

### **Chickens**

It's not like Kathy Hanson is a mother hen to her students; she is, however, a guiding influence and a positive, patient force. But while interviewing her at her home, this reporter is struck by the fact that she and her husband Frank have three chickens, some of which have names that relate to Kathy's artistic sensibility. There's Reddy (a color), Phoeny (pronounced "Feeny," short for "Phoenix" which brings to mind

something rising from the ashes, like a clay fired item), and Cochey (short for Cochin, a type of chicken). Kathy says she and her husband Frank sit out on their deck sometimes listening to the chickens chat. I chuckle when she tells me Frank refers to those listening sessions as the Chicken Channel.



The seven-year-old chickens are minding their business behind the wood fence pictured here.

Kathy Hanson is a juried member of the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen and the New Hampshire Art Association. Her clay works are impressive and sometimes very large. She paints boldly but also delicately whether she's applying color to clay or to watercolor paper. Her hands are strong and expressive, and demonstrate a mastery whether making forceful strokes or feather-like sweeps.

### **Clay vs. Paper**

*"The clay is really such a process and it's heavy and it's bumpy and there's a lot of stuff to clay, and I love clay and I still do clay but I wanted a medium I could take with me that was more portable."*

In other words, it's a lot easier to throw some paints, brushes, and paper into a back seat than it is to load up a kiln for a creative road trip.

*"In ways it (watercolor) reminded me a lot of pottery. In pottery there are a lot of stages, and your last stage is the glazing of the pieces where they change in the firing. You put on a glaze and it goes through the firing and it really changes. But when you dry a watercolor it really changes as well. So I think patience is something you really have to learn with watercolor... if you're impatient like me."*

This is where I learn something surprising about Kathy Hanson. As a matter of full disclosure, I am one of her students. I believe she is a patient person.



Less surprising is the understanding that she loves to teach and loves to learn along the way.

*"You get an idea of what it's like to learn the technique yourself. Because I'm experienced, when I learn a technique and have trouble with it then I know other people will too. Learning it in advance helps me to distill it so I can present it in the simplest terms, for people who don't have much experience, or ANY experience."*

### **Watercolor Painting is Simple**

No, it's not.

Watercolor painting is deceptively challenging for all kinds of reasons. An unscientific survey of many of Kathy's students confirms that, and also reveals that human beings love a challenge. Many of them also love to make art.

*"When you first do work you're very critical of it... almost like you have a voice inside of you saying that's not good enough. The right side of the brain is creative, the left side is verbal. So you have to leave the critic for a separate time to look at your work, or you'd never complete a painting. Part of the work for a student is to leave your critic outside the studio."*

It turns out practicing that mental exercise is just about as important to the process of painting as choosing a good subject, mixing colors, or using the right brush.

*"Put your work up on a wall at home and look at it. That's always the homework. That's it. You don't necessarily have to work on it, you just have to look at it. You become kinder to yourself if you look at a work over the course of a few days."*



Some of Kathy's works in her studio, with her face reflected in the mirror of the lower piece.

*"You can't create work and critique your work at the same time."*

### **You Shouldn't Listen All the Time Either**

Kathy Hanson decided to be an artist the minute she got out of school. She'd taken many pottery and painting classes and loved clay, "really loved clay," and was primarily a potter for many years.

She had an experience in college--one teacher who gave a very harsh critique of her drawing. He said: "You sure have a lot to learn about drawing".

*"And I was at a point where I was trying to decide which medium I was going to go into, whether it would be clay or it would be painting or drawing. And that teacher's, I mean just his one offhand harsh comment, made a difference. And I thought, well I could never be a painter."*

She became a potter who painted on clay.



*"You have to be careful of who you want to critique your work: do you like them, do you respect them? Especially when you're young."*

I suggest that's true at any age. Kathy postulates that finding a good critic is essential for any creative work. Especially when starting out.

*"Look for support. You can get to a point where people can critique your technique. But I don't think you need to have people critiquing your intent."*

### **Here and Now and Then**

Kathy hangs her students' works at the Philbrick-James library with care and an attention to detail that's illuminating. And once again I think she's patient.



Kathy levels and sometimes re-levels the paintings she hangs.

Hanson's own works aren't in this show, except indirectly. Several pieces represent first-time efforts, and they all reflect her skill and passion as an artist and a teacher. She had her own Library Exhibition earlier this year, the majority of the paintings in it came from a workshop in Maine, given by a friend and fellow artist Susan Shatter.



Kathy stands in front of the painting she created near Milbridge, Maine.

*"If it weren't for Susan Shatter I wouldn't have developed the passion I now have for watercolor and I wouldn't be at a point where I'd be confident to teach. It was all her support and influence. The show that's up at the library ... is her influence."*

And because of that, members of the community in and around Deerfield now come

together at the Library to celebrate their collective works. During the recent Gallery Opening, students said things like "This is my first painting," or "I've never put something in a frame before ever," or "Kathy taught me how to make my own frame." Several of the students are skilled artists, some are beginner painters. All of them hope the exhibition drives curious friends, family, and neighbors to check out the works on display, and to possibly consider taking a watercolor class of their own.



Some of the artists admiring some of the artists' work.



Almost all of the artists with their teacher at the Gallery Opening.

*" I think the more people who paint, the better the world will be. I really do. I have to be doing my artwork. It's absolutely essential to my life."*

There are many more students to teach in this world, many new techniques to explore, and many skilled and not-yet skilled artists to influence and guide. For Kathy Hanson, this is a job with obvious benefits.

*"People are peaceful when they're painting. They're being fulfilled. And I have to make art. I don't see it as ever stopping. I imagine having a paintbrush in my hand until the day I die."*

*This is my retirement plan."*

**The Gallery Artists**

Students represented in the current Library Exhibition are:

Tomi Buzzell  
Kathy Humes  
Russet Jennings  
Skip Kelley  
Karen Leavitt  
Liz Bulkley  
Barb Rollins  
Jane Serio  
Lori M. Shepard  
Jennifer Siberman  
Martha Smith  
Glenda Sorak

To view a slideshow of their work, click [this link](#).

*Kathy Hanson teaches watercolor at her studio in Deerfield. She can be reached at 603-463-7562 or kephansonATaol.com.*

*Her new clay work can be seen at the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen's "Living With Craft Exhibition" at the Annual Craftsman's Fair at Mt. Sunapee in August. She'll also be displaying her watercolors on four linear feet of wall space at the New Hampshire Art Association's tent at the Craft Fair.*

*The student watercolors on display at the Philbrick-James Library in Deerfield will be exhibited during regular library hours through mid August.*