

Artist Cynthia Packard coming into her own

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<http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/default/article/Artist-Cynthia-Packard-coming-into-her-own-983828.php>

Published: 05:06 p.m., Friday, January 28, 2011

Painter [Cynthia Packard](#) will tell you her art spawns from a deep connection with nature. Her flowers burst off the canvas, skies thicken with a determined presence, beaches and dunes hum atmospheric mind song for figures, usually



Abundance

young girls and women. Her paintings are a real eye-fest.

A lot happens on Packard canvases, especially in the new body of work seen in her current one-woman show at Galerie Sono in South Norwalk. These paintings solidly catapult

Packard to the forefront of the contemporary art scene, a lofty status she has earned from 30-plus years of painting.

Packard's path to recognition hasn't been easy. She grew up with role models who both inspired and overshadowed. Her mother, Anne Packard, is a renowned landscape painter, and her great-grandfather, [Max Bohm](#), was a prominent, early 20th century impressionist painter. As a young adult, Packard would copy the great artists as well.

"I first learned to paint by looking at other artists," Packard recalls. "I painted like Matisse until one of my friends told me I had to stop. My painting is really elements of many different artists like Cezanne and Manet. It was as if I had affairs with each one. I take a little bit from them and add my own little edge."

There is a raw energy that reverberates off Packard's paintings, an energy that the artist herself says comes from her innermost, emotional turbulence. Two divorces, raising four children single-handedly, replete with the joys and pains of child-rearing and a host of life's roller coaster hurdles, all feed Packard's psychological well, that alternately supplies both angst and tranquility for her to creatively dip into.

Longtime friend and painter [Nicolletta Coli](#) says that over the years Packard has become increasingly fearless in her work.

"Cynthia has never been afraid. She takes huge gambles, huge steps. Every year her style changes. She will always do flowers and nudes but the way she

does them -- there will be something added to it. She works on something intensely until she's done with it. Then she does something different."

Although Packard's subject matter has remained the same over the last 20 years, the risk she takes is in her approach. Thick, slathery paint partners with shellac, wax and tar; brushes are worked alternately with a blow torch, canvas is replaced with plywood board.

"Using a blow torch means I can move the paint the way I want to. The way I come to my subject matter has changed drastically," says Packard.

Hers are the formidable tools that make the act of painting like a dance. Packard's arms are extended with the brush or the blow torch and her partner is the wood/canvas. She moves in spurts, patterning her steps much like karate moves -- it's no coincidence that she holds a black belt.

"My paintings are very physical. It's important how you stand; you attack or you dance, you fight with the canvas. Other times it's like you are massaging the canvas very lovingly," she says.

The mental activity is as vibrant as is the physical when making her art. Packard, who has created several works using a nude female, has used the same model for more than 15 years, a relationship she considers both intimate and cathartic.

"It's collaborative. While painting we are talking about our lives, our boyfriends, our siblings. It all goes into the painting."



Countryside

Sculptural, texturally dense, the paintings beg for tactile engagement, something Packard encourages. "I want you to come and touch them, put your hands all over. It's fine."

Packard, who is based in Provincetown, Mass., and New York City, has had her work collected by such people as Norman Mailer, Eric Severeid and Bob Vila. Her paintings adorn the corporate walls of Merrill Lynch, Cabot & Co. and are in permanent collections such as the [Albrecht-Kemper](#)

Museum (St. Joseph, Mo.) and the [Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art](#) (Kansas City, Mo.). A longtime friend and collector in Boston, [Dan Mullin](#), owns nine of Packard's paintings, some of them early work.

"They are very soothing, very livable," says Mullin. "One of my favorite ones is of Cynthia herself on the beach, throwing her daughter. It's such a dreamy painting."

Mullin also owns some of Packard's later work and remarks about how she, and her work, have changed. "I think right now she is happy and in a great space. It's reflected in her painting."

Also following Packard's diverse, artistic trajectory is [Claude Villani](#), Sono gallery owner. He originally showed her work around eight years ago.

"This show is a new plateau for her. It's clear that she is not afraid to use new elements such as encaustic and lace. Cynthia is not content in staying in her comfort zone. She always challenges herself, a mark of a true artist."

Villani attests to the popularity of shows he has had for Packard which have attracted many other artists and art students. He likens her work to music: "There is tension and resolution, like certain chords that are augmented and, with a sophisticated palate, resolves into a pattern."

The exhibition runs through Feb. 12 at Galerie Sono, 135 Washington St., South Norwalk. Hours are Tuesday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. Closed on Mondays. For details, visit www.sonogalerie.com, or call 203-831-8332.