

# Conversations in Color

**Sheri MacFarlane exhibits her work at the Vienna Arts Society gallery.**

BY MEGHAN WILLIAMS  
THE CONNECTION

If creativity is another language, as Shari MacFarlane says, then she has spent the last three years in an immersion program. After 15 years of selling wearable art – hand-painted clothing – in boutiques around Northern Virginia under the name Creek Crossing Crafts and time off from art to raise children, she picked up the brush again in the midst of a divorce three years ago. Her paintings, which resonate with themes of transformation and journeys, especially those of women, vary widely in style and subject. A handful of her more colorful works are included in the newest Vienna Arts Society exhibit, on view through Jan. 19.

Painting began as therapy for MacFarlane, and while she hasn't had technical training, she takes every opportunity to help others find a path to self-expression.

"I believe everybody's creative," she said. "I know how to facilitate getting people to that place where they can express themselves." She teaches in her in-home studio and at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax in addition to occasional workshops.

A Vienna resident, MacFarlane has exhibited paintings in juried shows at The Art League Gallery in Alexandria, Torpedo Factory Arts Center and she is a bin gallery member there. She was also recently accepted into the Lorton Arts Foundation Workhouse group, and hence will be one of the first artists exhibiting in the former Lorton Prison. She has upcoming shows planned for the Inova Fairfax Hospital Women's Center and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax. MacFarlane loves the diversity of expression: "I applaud anyone who is brave enough to hang their paintings, it's a joy

for me to hang with all these people."

WHILE MANY OF MacFarlane's pieces are large – 30" by 40" canvases are common – she frequently uses smaller pieces on watercolor paper as a warm-up when she begins painting. She starts without an idea of what the end result will be, even whether it will have a subject or be abstract. She lays down gesso, frequently moving it around the canvas with her hands, "as a child would enjoy playing with materials." Lately her preference has been for acrylics, which offer a chance to put down numerous layers of paint, sometimes enough to change the canvas completely. "I have paintings that I've worked on that are yellow and green and gold, and now they're hanging on walls and they are white and blue and turquoise."

MacFarlane can't imagine working any other way. "I can't change my process for any one or any thing – even money," she said, explaining that specific commissioned work is not for her. When she agreed to an upcoming exhibit at the Inova Fairfax Women's Center, she was asked not to include work with spiritual overtones, or featuring animals. Because she

does not plan her paintings before working on them, MacFarlane said it is taking longer than expected to complete enough paintings fitting the Women's Center's criteria.

Throughout the process, she adds texture, either with paper for an element of collage or simply by using various tools to mark the paint. Wire gutter guards show up as a waffle pattern in several of her paintings, as do trailing lines where a comb has been dragged across a canvas. If MacFarlane's not happy with the way a painting is going – if it "looks like wallpa-

per," as she puts it – she rotates the canvas to find a more appealing angle.

Because she's not working with a specific goal in mind, MacFarlane has a hard time saying when a painting is finished. Sometimes it takes an outsider's perspective: a friend urged MacFarlane to leave "A Scent of Color," one of the paintings in the Vienna Arts Society show, in its current form. But even hanging a painting on a wall isn't always the last word. "A Supportive Community," another painting in the Vienna show, falls into this category: while working on it, MacFarlane felt overwhelmed by the darkness in the top part of the painting, and

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— Shari MacFarlane

added red houses to keep the darkness at bay. She said she's still not sure it's finished.

"A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY" serves as an example for something else as well: how the viewers of MacFarlane's paintings enter into her work. "Creating is another language," she said. The communication begins as a personal experience and then expands when the painting has an audience. "At first it's a conversation between myself and the painting, and then with the viewer."

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Shari MacFarlane with her work at the Vienna Arts Society show.



"Picking Up the Pieces," 30"x40" acrylic/collage with ceramic pieces.



"In Principio," 27"x35" acrylic/collage

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An early viewer of the VAS show connected with shadowy, spirit-like figures in the top left of the painting; MacFarlane had not noticed the figures before. "That's when I know there is a conversation going on," she said. "I love that part of it."

At the same time, when there is a story that has developed during the process of a painting,

MacFarlane wants the person who buys that painting to be able to appreciate it. She told a story about a potential buyer who saw her painting "In Principio" in a show at the Art League in Alexandria. MacFarlane spoke with the woman, whose motives for wanting to make the purchase were not what the artist intended; the woman wanted the painting because its color scheme matched her décor, and she intended to turn the piece on its side. MacFarlane talked her out of buying the painting. "I cannot bear the thought of someone buying my painting to match their sofa, without understanding the story." (There is a happy ending: the following week someone else, who MacFarlane says did understand the story, bought "In Principio.")

The story of a painting is sometimes based more in feelings than in a narrative. MacFarlane said once

she caught herself puckering her mouth as she worked with a shade of yellow; she was smelling and tasting lemons as she painted. She admitted it sounded a strange, but said it served as proof that creating is one of humanity's basic languages. "The more right-brained I become, the more I can see and taste that painting."

Two other paintings, "Picking Up the Pieces" and "Joyful Arrangement" were others that resonated with people who saw them. "Picking Up the Pieces" took MacFarlane nine months to finish, incorporating major shifts in lighting and the addition of pieces of raku pottery. A psychologist friend of MacFarlane's, perhaps having some personal and professional interest in the transformation the painting showcased, now owns it. An Oakton couple was looking for a painting to send to a Boston hospital in memory of a friend; they wanted just the right feeling of joy and brightness to honor the memory. They responded to "Joyful Arrangement," which MacFarlane said she painted after "going in there very sad and transforming my sadness."

The transformation evident in her work is on display at the Vienna Arts Society gallery, 513 Maple Ave. W, through Jan. 19. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Call 703-319-3220 or visit [www.viennaartsociety.org](http://www.viennaartsociety.org) for more.