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It's never too 'Lait' to become an artist



CYNTHIA LAIT knows exactly what folks mean when they say life is a journey.

An engineer by trade, Lait recently took the plunge to aggressively pursue her lifelong passion of being an artist. It's an experience that's been rich with delights.

"It's this fabulous adventure," Lait explained of her earnest foray into art. "When I started doing this seriously, you always have this idea of being this famous artist and have everybody 'ooh' and 'ah' about your work. Now that I'm doing it, the act of painting and living the artist's life -- going to shows and taking your work to places -- is wonderful. I'm absolutely loving it."

Lait, a San Ramon mother of two young children, has been drawn to art her entire life. She comes from a creative family that includes a great-grandfather who was a painter and her father, who dabbled in fancy woodwork.

"It's always been in the family, but it was never seen as a proper job or career," she admitted.

Lait took the path expected of her, getting her engineering degree, marrying and having a family. She works as a Web program manager at Documentum in Pleasanton. Her husband, Steve, is the editorial cartoonist for the Herald and its parent company, ANG Newspapers.

Nearly three years ago, Lait converted a spare bedroom at her home into a studio. She took art classes and started marketing her colorful and often abstract paintings.

"It's the kind of thing where you always wanted to do it and you just say, 'You know what? I'm doing it,'" she declared. "I don't know if it's because I turned 40 or because I was tired of putting these things on the back burner. It just became more urgent."

Lait immersed herself in the local and regional art community. She started showing pieces at shows, most often ones that featured several artists. She recently landed her biggest gig with a one-woman show at the Wente Vineyards Estate Winery tasting room in Livermore. The monthlong show runs through the end of May.

"I love her work," gushed Edmee Keele, a local artist who has coordinated Wente's art shows since 1990. "It's different, but it's so vibrant."

The Wente venue is particularly intriguing for artists and inviting for art connoisseurs, whether they be experts or amateurs.

"It is less threatening than to go to a gallery," Keele said of the laid-back winery environment. "We get all kinds of public at Wente, from people who are not interested in looking at the art to some people who come in specifically for the art."

The two hexagonal-shaped rooms that comprise the visitors' center are seemingly custom-made for art shows. Alcoves in the stone architecture provide natural nooks for displaying art. Viewers can casually shop and sip wine while they peruse the art.

"This is an easy place to see some art without making a trip to the city," said Keele, who specializes in making prints. "There's no charge and you can pace your own time."

Lait specializes in acrylics, a water-based permanent paint that dries quickly. She prefers the quick-drying paint because "my time is unpredictable," she noted. "I can make changes a half hour later if I need to."

Most of her paintings are smooth, but some include textured pieces of paper that are integrated into the art. She prefers working with oversized canvases, some as big as 4 feet square or even larger.

"I paint standing up," she explained. "It's kind of like this dance. It becomes a whole body thing. I move all around. I get closer to the canvas when I'm painting, and then I move back to look at it."

She also prefers an expansive piece because "it has more impact on a wall when you have a large painting," she said. "When you take small objects and make them big, it makes it more interesting. They have more presence."

Lait has 21 pieces on display at Wente, ranging from abstract landscapes and whimsical dancing pears to her signature "Windows Series" of brightly colored windows within windows. Prices range from \$225 to \$1,250.

"I'm thrilled to have that much work up in one place," she said. "My windows paintings look really good in this venue. The inside of the winery is mostly brick and has a dark, intimate atmosphere, so the windows paintings are almost like windows to the outside. I was surprised that it came out that way."

Lait hopes one day to turn her art hobby into a full-time job. She pounds the pavement regularly, searching for galleries from Los Angeles to Berkeley that are just the right match for her type of art.

"It really doesn't matter if I make it into this world of famous artists," she said. "I'm doing what I love."

Lait's art show, "Somersault," runs through May 31 at the Wente Vineyards Estate Winery tasting room, 5565 Tesla Road, in Livermore. Hours are 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. For more information, call the winery at (925) 456-2305 or visit www.cynthialait.com

Got a good column idea? Or maybe you're just curious about something around town. Send your ideas or questions to Zoe Francis at zoe@zoe francis.com or call (925) 461-1170. Letters may be sent to 4770 Willow Road, Pleasanton