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Palette of the Soul

Every hour of the day, Boulder painter Erin Robbins is awash in color. It's more than just the watercolors or oils she applies to canvas — color literally surrounds her. The walls of her home and studio are painted with lush hues: blueberry, mustard, seafoam green, royal purple. Exotic Oriental rugs weave color and pattern along the floor, and turquoise, crimson and lapis glass jars and vases perch on shelves and sills.

"I'm utterly in love with color," Robbins unabashedly declares. "I feast on color when I'm walking down the street. It saturates me all day long, and it's the bridge that leads me into my work," she explains. Indeed, color is one of the most striking aspects of her paintings, whose expressionist style often features the human figure emerging from abstract geometric shapes. Influenced by Klimt and Chagall, Robbins' work seeks to express the

soul and is deeply infused with emotion. "I believe that creating and experiencing art has the potential to bring us into closer contact with our soul, with our essence," she professes. "That's why people are drawn to the arts."

Creativity and its spiritual link have been a life-long credo for Robbins, who holds degrees in art and art therapy. "Creativity is an essential part of healing," she says, recalling her devotion to art since early childhood.

After working for several years as an art therapist helping others use creative expression to tap into their true selves, Robbins set aside her paintbrush to pursue another aspect of her spiritual path in India. When she returned to the States, she focused her energies on entrepreneurial ventures and she co-founded a spiritual educational organization. She became so involved in the business world that she believed her days of making art were past. Instead, painting was about to play an even more critical role in her life.

Healing with Creativity

Four years ago, Robbins was seriously hurt in a head-on car collision in which she sustained head injuries that caused her a loss of some of her cognitive function for almost two years. "Before the accident, I could juggle a zillion details in my brain," she says. "But the head injury made it hard to think in linear ways. For a long time, even a simple decision like what clothes to wear became difficult." Unable to work, Robbins started painting to heal and relax. "Once again art opened up creative dimensions of myself



Robbins at work

that had closed down over the years," she says. "It took a major bang on the head for me to return to that essential part of myself."

Her own healing through art taught Robbins that she could touch the lives of others through painting. She was amazed when people were so moved by looking at her work that they wept. "Now I'm aware of art as my inner directive," she says. "Painting requires that I stay as connected with myself as possible. Being an artist is more than holding a paintbrush in my hand — it's a self-reflective way of life. I have to spend time being quiet and sensitive to subtleties and nuances in my surroundings so I can express them in paint," she says.

Staying open is part of Robbins' process. "I work intuitively," she explains. "At first I have no idea what a painting is going to be, so I spend time intuitively painting — often starting with abstract geometric shapes. At a certain point, I sit on the couch with a cup of tea for an hour or so just looking at the canvas. I still don't know what will come, but if I watch and wait, the painting will show me what wants to happen."

As Robbins works, she blends the magical elements of making art with technique and skill. As a painting progresses over the weeks, some images that were clearly delineated become more obscured as she adds color and texture. "I love the layering. It so reflects the reality of life — that there are so many dimensions and so many layers of



"Mother and Child," oil pastel/watercolor

meaning to being human," she says.

Robbins is now devoted fulltime to her art, and her paintings are held in private collections throughout the country. A few times a year, she teaches painting classes because she loves to share the inner process of making art. Her workshops focus more on process than technique, since she aims to help others develop their unique expression. "I lead specific exercises that help us access the various corners of our creative selves," she says. "I believe each of us has enormous creative capacity."

Robbins' paintings will be on display this March at Sunflower Restaurant, 1701 Pearl St., in Boulder. She also participates in Boulder's annual fall Open Studios art exhibitions. For showings at her studio or for information on classes, call 303-449-9556. ■

— Laurel Kallenbach