

# A LIFE IN ART



## THE MANY TALENTS OF DONNA STRAW

ARTIST PROFILE BY GWYN MCALLISTER

**Artist** Donna Straw sees the world through a prismatic lens. She creates highly stylized paintings by separating her subjects into bands of color, with curves created by using a series of angled lines. This reductive linear approach allows the artist to focus on color and form, and play around with depth and perspective in creative ways.

However, it's not an easy way to build up an image. The paintings are created through a painstaking process involving taping areas before applying acrylic paint to ensure crisp clean lines. *continued on next spread*

**Ceder\_Tree\_Neck\_Sanctuary** – (opposite - from the Botanicals Series)

**Departure** – (above from the Reflections Series)

From The Campground Series



Flying Horses



Union Chapel



Alchemy



Donna Straw

Every single section of a painting – from the lines of color making up a sky or seascape, down to the meticulously formed outlines of a boulder or the shape of a tree – is done with the taping process. Straw spends hours demarcating lines and edges with ¼ inch tape before applying the paint.

“I love the process,” says the artist. “I start from something that inspires me, generally something on the Vineyard. My images come partly from real life and partly from imagination. Sometimes I combine images from different

places. I draw the picture out directly onto the canvas then I erase away and add. My sketch is there. It’s what I have conceived. Once I’ve played it out and I like the composition, I get into the magic of mixing color. I don’t have a formula for how I juxtapose the colors. Once I have the basic structure, I can veer off wherever I want from that design. That’s my challenge. That’s my magic sauce. That’s what I love more than anything. Ultimately you are communicating a mood that you maybe didn’t start out with but that develops over

*continued on next spread*



Lily Pond



Reflection



Distant Shoreline

the course of the painting.”

Straw is best known for this innovative technique, which has earned her a reputation on the Vineyard and beyond. However, over the years she has experimented with other styles, although there is always a sort of consistency in Straw’s paintings that makes her work easily identifiable with the artist. “I am very much more of a graphic designer,” says Straw. “My paintings are designed out. So that I’m able to convey a movement or a process. That’s the way my brain functions.”

Straw’s taping technique derives from an area she pursued while earning her master’s degree in fine art from Montclair State College. “I decided to do

very large architectural pieces. This was a style I just gravitated to,” she says. “It’s very tedious, but I was able to articulate what I wanted to say with the taping.”

Straw eventually put her own creative work on hold to embark on a teaching career. For 30 plus years she taught drawing, painting and studio art to high school students in Nyack, NY. Finally, after retiring and moving full time to the Vineyard in 2008, Straw took up painting again.

A visit to the former *Shaw Cramer Gallery* in Vineyard Haven inspired the artist to return to her roots. When Nancy Shaw Cramer invited the Island transplant to join the group of artists she

represented, Straw decided to experiment with her draftsman like taping technique, but this time on a much smaller scale – both in terms of her choice of subject and the dimensions of her paintings. Her series of birdhouse paintings from that time feature a geometric colorful “quilt” background for her avian subjects and their tiny homes. Straw used some metallic paint touches to add further interest to her stylized images. “It was all about design and color,” says the artist. The series proved very popular and Shaw showed the paintings there for two years.

Inspired by Oak Bluffs’ famous gingerbread cottages, Straw next expanded

her artistic universe to create a series called *Campground Cottages*. These proved a natural fit for the *Cousen Rose Gallery*, located on Circuit Ave on the edge of the Oak Bluffs’ Campground, so Straw began a relationship with owner Zita Cousens that lasted seven years. For the *Cottages* series the now established artists turned toward a somewhat more representational approach to her subjects. This time she put her houses into context – using her taping technique to create streets and footpaths and building up colorful skies from bands of solid color.

After a few years of showing the cottages, Straw decided to experiment with a more fluid, organic approach to her sub-

jects. She started painting landscapes and seascapes freehand – without the use of taping. In these she presented broad vistas inspired by the Vineyard while still working in a quiet palette and often including explicit lines for the boundaries of objects. This proved to be a big departure for the artist and, although, the scenes sold well, Straw found herself gravitating back to her original technique.

A change of venue to the *A Gallery*, which at that time occupied a large space on Uncas Ave in Oak Bluffs, allowed Straw to combine her styles – painting Vineyard inspired landscapes, but this time using bands of color to build up her images. *A Gallery* owner Tanya Augstoninos

focused solely on contemporary art so the new work done in Straw’s innovative style suited the gallerist’s mission.

Paintings from the series titled “Dreamscapes” tend to feature quiet scenes rendered in a somewhat toned down palette. Along with her striated skies and seas, Straw added other elements, created through the taping process. She continued to use metallic paint sparingly to add glints of sunlight and to create spherical suns and moons.

For the first time Straw started including some curvilinear objects in her paintings. Rocks became a favorite subject. Many of her *Dreamscapes* showcase

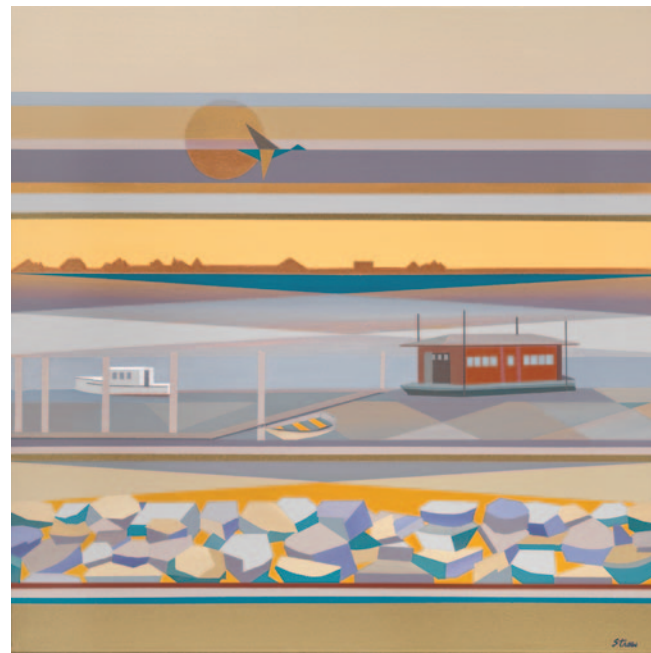
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Another Day



Dreamscape



Far Cry



Martha's Vineyard Bound



**Bite Sized Treats** – (above - Donna's answer to Covid lockdown, small ink and color drawings of the world around her)

stone walls or rock jetties with each individual stone built up by a painstaking application of small strips of tape to create polygonal images of rocks. "I love modeling the rocks," says Straw. "I was rock obsessed."

Another image that pops up often in the imagined land and seascapes are birds – represented in what Straw refers to as an origami style – made from a series of sharply pointed diamond and triangular shapes. Around this time the artist also developed a fascination with boats, which most likely appealed to her fondness for architectural elements, as well as years spent on the Island

When Augustinos moved her gallery to West Tisbury, Straw switched over to the *Nikki Sedacca Gallery* in Edgartown where her series called *Reflections* featuring rowboats anchored on abstracted blue and turquoise seas proved a perfect fit for Sedacca's lovely light-filled gallery and jewelry boutique. Appropriately, the artist showed these paintings in Florida at Sarasota's *530 Burns Gallery*.

Around the same time Straw undertook a series of botanical images inspired by time spent in Naples FL. These soothing images in subdued colors spotlight lily ponds and marshy scenes with interesting grasses and other plant life. The rounded lily pads, tangled plant growth and pond reflections demonstrate somewhat of a departure from Straw's passion for the linear but the artist's unique style is still in evidence in the geometric shapes formed by meticulous taping.

"The botanical series was not planned," says Straw. "I'm always just waiting for inspiration and I know it when I see it."

Prior to the botanicals, Straw undertook a series of tree paintings, which proved to be among her favorites. These combine curved tree trunks with jagged branches and striated forest paths, again built up through taping out all of the minutia.

When the corona virus shut the world down temporarily, Straw saw it as a chance to stop and reflect on her career. Not one to enjoy a sedate retired life however; the artist started creating small drawings of the world around her. She calls these *Bite Sized Treats*.

"Drawing was an area that I took for granted," she says. "I taught paint-

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD  
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Into The Woods



Pond life



**Bite Sized Treats** – (above - Donna's answer to Covid lockdown, small ink and color drawings of the world around her)

ing and drawing for years but I didn't appreciate that I could draw. I love the fluidity and spontaneity of working with a fine line pen."

So far Straw has gifted the Bite Size Treats to friends and posted them on Facebook and Instagram. She has sold some through social media but it's not really about the business of art in this case. She has kept the drawings affordable and has found the endeavor personally gratifying. "It liberates me to do these drawings. They make me happy and it makes other people happy. They're just fun affordable gifts."

Where will Straw's journey take her

next? For now she's enjoying having some time to herself, not beholden to a gallery or to the many collectors of her paintings. "You can't just paint what galleries want," says the artist. "Otherwise it makes you stilted. I think creative people have to nourish themselves and not worry about what sells and what doesn't sell."

For the present time Straw is happy to use the time to reflect and reassess her career. The drawings give her a creative outlet while allowing her some time to work out what she will pursue next. "The drawings don't gratify my need to create as much, but I love the

reflective part of it. I sit back and say to myself, 'You've devoted half of your life to teaching, then you had the luxury to explore your own talent on the Vineyard.'"

It will be interesting to see where Straw's exploration takes her next. **VS**

You can check out Donna's latest creations at: [www.donnastraw.com](http://www.donnastraw.com)  
At her Instagram page at: [www.instagram.com/donna.straw](https://www.instagram.com/donna.straw) or on Facebook at: [facebook.com/donnastraw](https://facebook.com/donnastraw)  
Donna is selling her line drawings and acrylic paintings from her home. You can email Donna at: [artspirit39@aol.com](mailto:artspirit39@aol.com) to arrange for a private showing.

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Menemsha Cottage in Autumn, Martha's Vineyard

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