

by Steve McConnell
ABINGTON SUBURBAN WRITER

She awakes with a portrait in mind.

A light snow falls upon her grandfather's Dalton farm as Marylou Chibirka opens a glass door to her studio, illuminated only by natural light, a preference of the artist.

She moves toward a large canvas, a portrait of a man or woman that you or I may very well know.

Oil palette and brush now in hand, she massages the last bits of detail with a simple dab and nuanced stroke.

"I stand when I paint, and I use my whole body ... my heart and soul," said Chibirka in a recent interview.

Where she paints is also an act of heart and soul. She designed her studio and adjacent home about two years ago from scratch, literally, drawing the plans upon graph paper of what would become the place where she creates and displays her creations.

"I was not a 3-D architect," she said, but with two years of tinkering, the design was complete. "I wanted a very modern but simple architecture."

The studio is lit from an expansive window, set high, facing north, allowing natural light to seep in throughout the day – a painter's dream.

"Lighting is important to an artist," she said.

Wall space is also critical and the studio accommodates with long and high walls for her portraits, which fill it from corner to corner.

Faces glisten at all angles, energizing what would otherwise be blank space.

Chibirka's main forte is her portraits of people. Oils are her medium.

Many of her subjects are from the area and from every walk of life. A walk around her studio reveals: a chef within his culinary element, a monsignor with cross dangling, two sisters holding one another in reflective pose, a flamenco dancer persuaded by guitar; a long-haired, bearded, dignified-looking blue-collar man; and Chibirka's daughter, violin in hand.

Chibirka, whose work is on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and was shown locally at the Everhart Museum, strives to reach beyond true-to-life portrait painting. She is not just concerned with accurate lines or color tones.

She seeks, rather, to understand her subject — beneath the skin — to get a sense of their uniqueness, their underlying personality, in order to deepen the portrait and offer a truer sense of who that person really is.

"I am amazed that everyone has two ears, two eyes and a mouth, yet we are all so individual," she said. "And they don't have to be intensely interesting. They are strong in their own individual uniqueness."

"I always push (the painting) to where I want to go, but they are very true to life," she said.

What helps her form a portrait can sometimes be a conversation with her subject. While painting Monsignor John Esseff, of Our Lady of the Abingtons Church, Chibirka listened to him explain how Christ felt upon the cross.

Christ's feeling of "isolation, rejection and abandonment" struck Chibirka, and she imprinted the monsignor's portrait with his words, a testament to his convictions, a light touch of ideology discretely placed.

The painter has leaned toward the visual arts ever since she was a child growing up on her grandfather and father's dairy and produce farm.



Marylou Chibirka with some of her portraits in her Dalton studio.

PHOTO STEVE MCCONNELL

"I remember always having an ample supply of coloring books," said Chibirka, one of seven siblings, of Lithuanian and Polish descent. "It was just natural ... (and) I do remember, as a little girl, always having paper and a sharpened pencil."

She would take the artistic inclination along to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, earning degrees in painting and art history. Then she furthered her studies at the Arts Student League in New York City.

It was there that she was taught and influenced by Everett Raymond Kinstler, a renowned American portraitist, who painted Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and five U.S. presidents.

Other influences to her style include Lucian Freud, who had an indelible artistic impact with his nude portraits, and John Singer Sargent, renowned for his strikingly colorful portrait of Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park, among others.

Yet, her goal is to achieve "a Chibirka," a style all of her own. She has done this successfully since 1999, when she became a full-time portraitist, earning her living completely by the brush.

"I think one thing that shows in all my work is the energy," she said. "I like to paint large (canvases). After you paint large and you go to something small, it feels like there is a postcard on the wall."

She has completed more than 250 commissioned works and she is accepting requests from those who may be interested in their own portrait.

Chibirka will hold a grand opening on Sunday, Feb. 10, from 2-5 p.m. with a half-price special on a 20-by-24-inch commission portrait.

Directions from Clarks Summit: go north on Route 6/11 past Pastel's restaurant. Turn left on Humphrey Road. At "T" intersection, turn right on Northup Hill Road and go 1.5 miles to stop sign. Turn left on Wilbur Hill Road. Go one mile. Chibirka Gallery is on left.

Chibirka can work from photographs, including those of deceased loved ones. She can take a photograph and paint from it, or an interested person can sit at her Dalton studio.

She also accepts students, of all levels, who desire art instruction.

Chibirka can be contacted at 563-2774. Her work can be viewed on the Web at <http://chibirkagallery.blogspot.com> and



Chibirka with "Two Faces."

PHOTOS STEVE MCCONNELL

