

the art of living

Tiny toes, tan from the summer sun, dangle over the edge of the dock as Betty Anglin Smith's fresh-faced granddaughters toss crab lines into the brackish water below. A smile stretches across Betty's face as she helps Hadley, the youngest of the girls, slowly pull in a line laced with raw chicken-neck. With large tongues lolling, family dogs Coleman and Chambi sloppily sniff a piece of the poultry as they pace around the perimeter of the bait pail. Although a salty breeze sweeps across the marsh, it offers little respite from the unforgiving humidity, and clothes begin to cling to moist skin. "Y'all ready for some watermelon?" Betty draws to her giggling granddaughters, who drop their lines into a five gallon bucket as they scurry to find the hands of their parents. Three generations of family then fall in a slapdash line as they make their way back down the dock towards the porch of the charming marshfront cottage.

by JULIE SPRANKLES • photography by MICHAEL COSTA

Betty and family congregate under the porch's haint blue beadboard ceiling. Standing left to right: Shannon Smith, Jennifer Smith Rogers, Betty, John Stone, Cody, Lad Rogers, and Jessica Smith. Seated left to right: Perrin Rogers, Ellie Rogers, Hadley Anglin Smith, and Tripp Smith.



As Betty serves up the sticky sweet refreshment of ripe watermelon, you get the sense her family sees the slices as another extension of the matriarch's artwork. One of Charleston's most beloved creative souls, Betty has been coloring the Lowcountry with her lush, vibrantly-hued landscape canvases for over thirty years. Catching up with the artist at her coastal haven, it's easy to see she lives her life much like she paints: boldly, full of color, and with spirit to spare.

It's so nice your family can all spend time together at your cottage in Meggett, "The Happy Mullet." And, speaking of your kids, let's tackle the fact that you have triplets! What was your first reaction when you initially found out?

We'd been married about five years, and my husband Cody and I just felt the time was right to start our family. When we got pregnant, I kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and finally I thought, I've got to be having twins. This was in 1972, so we didn't have ultrasounds at the time; you waited until you were far enough along for it to be safe to have an x-ray done. I had mine one afternoon around the time I was six months along, and then I went back into the office for the day—I was working in Governor John West's administrative offices at the time. Everybody knew I had gone in for the x-ray, and they were all expecting twins as well. I remember the doctor's office calling and telling me over the phone I wasn't having two babies, but rather three babies. I yelled out, "THREE!" and the whole office just went berserk. The doctors told me to quit working, go home, totally get off my feet, and relax. Well, I was too antsy and didn't exactly follow doctor's orders, so the



Betty sits in the sun-filled studio where she does all of her painting. Hanging on the easel is a work in progress titled "Marsh Blooms," while the painting she holds was inspired by a sunset view of her backyard.

triplets ended up coming about a month or so early. Tripp, Jennifer, and Shannon were only three and ½ pounds at birth and in the hospital for a month, not being able to come home until they weighed five pounds. But they were healthy babies!

Wow...two infants must be a handful; I can only imagine what it must have been like bringing up three at a time. How did you manage juggling everything?

I wasn't painting then and was enjoying my work but, at the same time, I was so ready to start a family. I think being in that mental frame is what saved me because this was something I had wanted so badly...I had

simply been blessed with a little bit more than I originally bargained for. But I had the most fun with those babies! I'd just sit on the floor all day and play with them. When the triplets were three months old, we moved from Columbia to Charleston into a little neighborhood full of other young mothers. We'd get together every day with the kids and it was such a relief to have that because, had I been isolated with no friends and no other mothers to be around, I think I would have struggled at that point. They were my support group.

So you weren't really painting when you became pregnant with the triplets, but clearly growing up surrounded by your art



Situated on the marsh, the cottage offers ample opportunity for taking advantage of favorite Lowcountry pastimes such as crabbing and fishing. On any given afternoon (granted the weather holds out!), this charmingly Charleston family can be found soaking up the sun on the bleached-out boards of the dock or lounging lazily in white Adirondack chairs perched strategically to partake of stunning sunsets over the water.



made a profound impact on their early development. When exactly did you start painting?

When Cody was in law school, I always liked to draw and dabble in paint. In college, I was always drawn—no pun intended!—to art appreciation classes and such. Knowing we were going to get married and he would be in law school, I realized I needed a practical job. I majored in elementary education, but only lasted about a year and a half teaching—I loved teaching but I didn't enjoy being a constant disciplinarian and having to deal with so much paperwork! So at night, when he was in law school, I would go to the college and take evening art classes for adults just for fun. When we moved here to Charleston, we used to do weekend outings around Charleston and, one weekend, we went down to the Battery where some artists were set up doing an art show. For me, it was just so exhilarating to see because I grew up in a small town in the upstate and had never even seen an artist at work. Seeing that was my epiphany... it was just a little outdoor art show, but it sparked something in me. Soon after, I found out that Gibbes [Museum of Art, on Meeting Street downtown] was offering art classes and that became my night out away. It was then I started to really get excited about art and decided I truly wanted to learn to paint.

When did you first realize this hobby of yours could possibly provide a career?

When we moved to Mt. Pleasant—the kids were about four years old at that point—I discovered the Seagull Gallery in Mt. Pleasant. It was a little co-op gallery where all the budding artists in Charleston were showing...artists like Rhett Thurman, Margaret Petterson, Patsy Tidwell, Steven Jordan, and then several others who have since moved away. The gallery taught classes, so upcoming artists would go take classes, work in there a few hours a week, and sell their paintings. I sold my first little watercolor there for 15 dollars to a guy that had a car body shop up in North Charleston! But that was my first sale and I can't tell you what that did for me...it lit a fire inside. So I took a corner of the spare bedroom in our house and made it a studio. The kids had just started kindergarten, leaving me with a block of time free where, all of sudden, I've got an empty house and time to myself. At first I filled that time with cleaning and running errands before I thought, *Hmm, I've got to find something more to do with my time than this!* That's when I really became more serious about painting. The kids are 38 now, so that was about 32 years ago. I painted watercolors for 10 or 15 years and then made the transition into oils, and have been an oil painter now for the last 20 years.



(above left) An "art cart" in the studio serves as Betty's paint palette and holds her oil paints and brushes.

(above right) A piece of folk art now adorning a wall on the screened porch served as inspiration for the cottage's name; the inscription on the folk art reads, "the happy mullet jumps for the pure joy of being alive."

(below) A large canoe and two colorful kayaks rest on a rack attached to the boathouse.



Shannon and Jennifer are both talented painters, Tripp is a sought-after photographer, and all three show their work at your gallery. Did your children go to school for the arts or was it something they started pursuing later in life?

Shannon and Jennifer always showed an ability and inclination for art. We had three going to college at once so they basically had a choice of which state school they wanted to go to! Well, the girls chose Clemson and Tripp chose University of South Carolina. When the girls went off to college, Jennifer was going to major in Architecture and Shannon was going to major in Fine Arts. Since the curriculum for those programs were both pretty much the same the first year and Jennifer just fell in love with the art side of it, both the girls ended up majoring in Fine Arts. At Carolina, Tripp was majoring in Media Arts because his interest had always been photography. When the girls finished college, they were single and thinking, *What are we going to do to make a living?* They decided they needed more education and needed to go into specific fields, so Jennifer started pursuing art therapy and Shannon became interested in occupational therapy after experiencing it personally when she suffered a broken leg in a skiing accident. But, to make a long story short, both girls exhibited in Piccolo Spoleto the spring of their senior year and the spring after graduation and found that they could be successful exhibiting their art. After a year of further studies, they both turned back to a career in painting. Tripp, on the other hand, went directly into a job with a media studio in Charleston. A few years later, he took the summer off and traveled the country in an old Volkswagen van. He photographed as many national parks as possible and, at that point, began to seriously devote his time to photography.

As the girls' paths began to veer toward painting, was there any advice you offered them based on your own experiences?

At the time, I was showing at the Wells Gallery and Bill Mayfield—the original owner of the Wells Gallery—hired Jennifer to work part time, and she started showing her work there. Shannon was painting on her own and started showing there too,



Betty's recent foray into abstract art is on full display in the dining room, where a large painting titled "Marsh Series V" serves as a focal point. Flanking the abstract piece are two small oil paintings depicting the home's sunset views.

and their work just took off. Shannon was also waitressing at Station 22 Restaurant to supplement her income, so my advice to them was, "If you're going to be serious about this and do this professionally, you need to get your work to the point of excellence that you can charge enough for it to support yourself by only painting. The most successful artists are the ones who live to paint and they do it every day. It should be the way of living a life—with a passion to paint."

As triplets and with a mother who was also an artist, I'd imagine your children each sought to carve out their own unique identity. How do their idiosyncrasies show

through in their artistic endeavors?

Growing up, Tripp always made a point to be as different from the girls as he could. They were the scholars—they were the ones that made the As in school—and he was the one you had to force to study. He just never wanted to compete with them. And it's funny because now they both paint and he went into photography, and I've always teased him and said, "Why don't you paint? Aren't you curious to see if this is something you may also want to do?" And he's so tempted. He says, "One of these days I'm just going to walk in there and do a painting." And I say, "I'd love to see it." He primarily focuses on architectural

photography, and black and white nature photography. With Jennifer and Shannon, they are identical twins so there is bound to be a thread of similarity in their work. But, like Tripp with his photography, Jennifer focuses mainly on architecture in her painting. Her style is a lot more detailed than, say, mine or Shannon's; however, her sense of color is more similar to mine. Shannon is pretty much an *alla prima* painter and the most versatile, doing figurative to still life to landscape, and even architecture. She may push the color, but her emphasis is to capture the light. It is a gift that all three went into the arts, and I'm both thankful and amazed.

On the subject of styles, your trademark look is highly recognizable...vibrantly colored landscapes—thick and bright—almost tactile on the canvas. How did you develop such a distinctive style?

As I transitioned from watercolor to oil, my watercolors were getting stronger and denser in color but, when I switched to oils, my early oils were very pastel. A trip to Sante Fe, NM changed all that. Eva Carter and I had just become the best of friends—she's an abstract painter that's been painting in Charleston forever, and she was one of my first teachers! Eva took me out to Santa Fe where we stayed on a ranch out in the desert and I was just so blown away by the landscape: the wide open skies, the colors, the sunsets. You don't have the humidity there like you have here, and everything there is just so sharp and clear. Going into the numerous art galleries on Canyon Road and seeing these huge, bold, colorful canvases, it just switched a light on in me. When I came back to Charleston, I started seeing that much color in the landscape here, or what I did see here, I exaggerated and pushed.

Your work has clearly had a hand in inspiring your children's creative enterprises. Are there any painters that have shaped your work in the last few years?

My work is frequently characterized by the use of red underpainting, which is a technique I borrowed from the Fauves artists such as André Derain and Matisse. I'm very much attracted to works, too, of colorful,

contemporary artists such as Wolf Kahn. Closer to home, I've admired the work of William Christenberry. I saw his work recently at The Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, and was impressed with the force of his brushwork and carefree splatters or 'artmarks.' So I returned to the studio and began pushing my work and putting more energy in the brushstrokes. Also, seeing Brian Rutenberg's paintings at the Gibbes recently, I was awed by the thick application of paint—his work is almost three di-

I love to hit flea markets and antique shops, so I'm constantly picking things up. I don't even worry about where something is going to go, I just pick things that I love and find a place for them when I get home.


mensional. Now I am making more of an effort to build up the painting surface in my work. His work borders on abstraction, although the landscape element is there...I feel I'm moving in this direction. Now I'm studying Joan Mitchell's works; she's an expressionist painter of the New York School from the 1950s. She really "speaks" to me with her vivid hues and gestural strokes. So yes, I'm influenced, but my work is mine. I strive to have my own unique voice in my paintings.

Clearly, you are passionate about what you do. What is it about painting that "speaks" so much to you?

To me, the beauty of painting is that you get to do whatever you want to do; there are no rules in painting. You can give me any rule about painting and I can show you where it can be broken and you can still have a successful painting. There is nothing more freeing than being able to walk into that studio and do whatever the heck I want to do on that canvas. Nobody is telling me how to do it; it's all me. And that's just great freedom. And I think that is one thing I'm enjoying about painting abstract right now—and I'm not going to give up the landscapes because I'm so in tune with this Lowcountry landscape I could never totally not paint it—but to go into that studio and be able to paint and not be confined to subject matter but let the paint start flowing and watch what unfolds...that is a whole new freedom that I am enjoying right now. At my age, I probably have 20 more years to paint and, even though it has been great, I don't want to do the next 20 years like I've done the last 20. So, as an artist, you're always searching for a new direction—something fresh, something exciting—to keep you going.

You may have sold your first painting for \$15 at the Seagull Gallery in Mt. Pleasant, but your work has since been shown all over the country and commands an impressive commission. What led to showcasing your work year-round in Charleston at the Smith Killian Fine Art Gallery downtown?

Bill Mayfield ended up selling the Wells Gallery—where I had been showing—to Hume Killian and, at the time Hume took it over, I had been painting in our house in Mt. Pleasant in my third floor studio. But I was feeling the need to be downtown! What I did in conjunction with the Wells was to open a studio at 40 Broad Street—where Brent's Restaurant is now—and sunk a small fortune in renovating it for a studio. I had a studio there for three or four years. It was always fun and interesting, especially in meeting the public and discussing my work. The most excitement came from meeting Donald Sutherland, the actor. He was here filming for "The Hunley," and he and his wife would often come in the studio. I would lock the door and we'd

A sunlit porch with a light green ceiling and a large window overlooking a marsh. The porch is furnished with antique wicker furniture, including a sofa, a coffee table, and two rocking chairs. A central coffee table holds a blue pot of orange flowers and a decorative box. The space is filled with various plants, including a large hanging plant on the left and a blue pot of purple flowers in the foreground. A decorative birdhouse hangs from the ceiling. The overall aesthetic is whimsical and rustic.

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Surrounded by ancient oaks and the marsh, the porch is a favorite gathering spot for family and friends. Antique wicker furniture and rocking chairs from the Asheville, NC Farmers' Market offer ample seating. Decorative birdhouses from the Brass Latch in Saluda, NC are in keeping with the space's whimsical aesthetic.



The attic ceiling was raised to make a loft style sleeping area for the children and grandchildren. Here, granddaughters Perrin (left) and Ellie (right) jump on one bed while Hadley sits on the antique bed Jennifer slept in during her childhood. The quilt Hadley perches atop was crafted by Betty's namesake, her Great Aunt Betty Oliver, and is adorned with the initials of the family's matriarchs.

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sit and relax and talk like old friends. He introduced me to the artists known in Canada as the Group of Seven; their work is in all the major museums there. When Donald returned to Toronto, he sent me several books of their work. He also bought two of my paintings, which was a thrill. At that same time, I was showing in a number of galleries around the country. One gallery in particular was Caldwell Snyder, which had given me solo shows in New York and San Francisco. They also featured me at Trajan Gallery in Carmel and, when I went out for the opening, I was just so impressed with the space. And I remember on the flight home thinking, *This is the kind of gallery I want to show my work in when I get home—clean and open and spare. I want to have a gallery to fea-*

nure my family's work. We had become sort of our own entity and were overwhelming the Wells with our work when they had a dozen other artists. So I came back and proposed the idea to Hume, asking him to be my equal partner in it, and Shannon found the perfect space at 9 Queen Street. We're still there today, celebrating our tenth anniversary this year!

Since you closed your studio on Broad Street when you opened Smith Killian Fine Art, where do you do your painting now?

Well, our home has been in Mt. Pleasant for thirty something years. When the studio on Broad closed, I knew I'd have to find another place to paint but also knew

our home in Mt. Pleasant wasn't quite the right place for it. At the same time, our family, friends, church—our life!—was in Mt. Pleasant and we just couldn't give that up. One day a friend and contractor, Steve Brush, commissioned me to do a painting from his view in Meggett. While photographing there, I fell in love with this little overgrown cottage nearby, but the property wasn't available at the time. In the summer of 2001, we were finally able to buy the cottage, but it was pretty brutally abandoned and hadn't really been touched since Hugo came through. One architect who came out and looked at it told us it smelled like animals had been living in it and his recommendation was to not even touch it. But all I could see was the charm and potential it had! I knew it would be the perfect place for my studio. After 18 months of renovation led by Steve, we moved into the cottage we now call "The Happy Mullet" during the summer of 2003.

Ever the artist, you obviously have the abil-



(left) Although the kitchen is all new, it was designed in keeping with the style of a 1920s cottage. (right) Hanging over an antique queen bed discovered at Robert Sarco Antiques in Hollywood, SC, a painting by Betty's daughter Shannon portrays her perspective of the view from the backyard overlooking the marsh.

ity to see beauty in the mundane...but it sounds like the cottage was in definite need of some TLC. What sort of things did y'all do to make it livable?

Oh, it was just a total renovation! The floors had collapsed in, there were holes in the roof.... This house was built in 1920 and, sometime after the 50s, there had been a small renovation and addition. Unfortunately, that renovation included unattractive 1970s style metal windows all across the back of the house, and the whole upper half of the backyard was concrete with a sunken swimming pool. When we were renovating, everything we demolished went into that swimming pool—that was our temporary landfill! But now it's beautiful. Whereas before all you saw when you looked out there was pavement, I can look out there now and see beautiful green grass and flowering plants and trees with Spanish moss.

Your studio has a breathtaking view of the yard, the dock, and the marshes beyond

where long-legged herons strike perfectly still stances as if they are posing for you. Do you do all your painting here?

Yes! I know my studio's not that big, but you'd be amazed at what you can do in there. I just finished a diptych painting that was 96-inches across—I had to set up two easels and two panels. I love to be lazy in the morning and sit in the living room, drinking coffee and reading the paper while listening to the birds in the backyard...that's how I work my way to the studio! I'll get in there late morning or by lunchtime and usually work until about 4pm in the afternoon. Some days I'm still in there at 10pm going strong, but I typically paint around four hours a day. I've been listening to Van Morrison and Neil Young lately when I work, but my musical taste varies. One day it will be rock and roll and the next day I'll turn on the spa music—you know, to calm me down! I also like country like Roy Orbison and Merle Haggard, and I really love the blues. I'm all across the board. And you

know, you get into the music and you start dancing at the easel and throwing paint and dancing a little more...and then some days you just want it perfectly quiet, and out here it is so quiet. We get wonderful sunsets here in the fall and in the winter, when it's not as hot and humid. I have painted that western view out here so many times I can't even tell you! I think that is what is so interesting about being out here—seeing how we've interpreted this landscape, because it's been painted from so many perspectives.

Your home has such a charmingly eclectic Lowcountry appeal, and the interior is peppered with furniture and accessories in pops of color and with weathered finishes. Where do you find such special pieces?

We sold our home of 30 years in Snee Farm in Mt. Pleasant, and downsized from 3,700 square feet to an 1,800 square foot home in T'On, so a lot of pieces came out the house that we had. I'm an avid collector, and I love to hit flea markets and antique shops,

Betty's interpretation of the view from the cottage's dock, an oil painting titled "Evening Stillness" hangs over the bed in the master suite.



so I'm constantly picking things up. I don't even worry about where something is going to go, I just pick things that I love and find a place for them when I get home. So just about everything out here are things I've collected over the last thirty years. Also, we go up to the mountains several times a year—my sister, Lynn, has a house at Lake Lure so we're up there a good bit—and I love to go junkin' up there. One of my favorite places to go when we visit is the Brass Latch shop in Saluda; I've gotten a lot of linens and handmade country pieces from owner Susan McMasters! I love to collect old linens from the 1950s and hand-crocheted pillow cases. A lot of the furniture and accessories in the cottage have also been handed down in my family, and are from my grandmother's house or from my mother's house.

Besides the obvious scenic beauty, which offers inspiration for your lush landscape paintings, how has this home made an impact on your life and the life of your family?

This is as Lowcountry as it gets! You are right

on the marsh, with wide open vistas. Everything I like to paint is here, right outside my studio. This cottage is so special. When we moved in, we had a "Cottage Christening" with a toast led by our dear friend—the late Honorable Mendel Davis—and with a blessing by former Mt. Pleasant mayor Harry Hallman along with all our Mt. Pleasant friends. But one of my most favorite things about this house is its ability to bring family together. When you're out here, you're here—everyone is so present in the moment. Even though we all live in Charleston, the whole family can gather and hang out and spend nights together and the holidays together here. We've been here for seven years. Through that period of time, we've had three grandbabies born

into the family—Ellie, Perrin, and Hadley—and both of our mothers passed away. Here at the cottage, Tripp and Jessica got married, we had a big wedding party for my sister's son Michael, we've had a number of oyster roasts for artists and friends, and a number of brunches and luncheons with gallery clients. There's just been a lot of life lived here! ♦

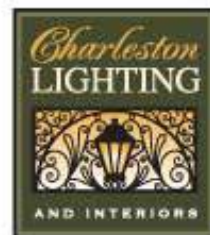
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To learn more about Betty's children and their art, visit charlestonhomeanddesign.com to view our exclusive web interviews with Tripp, Shannon, and Jennifer!



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