

HATTIESBURG, MS

## Heidi Pitre

*Young-at-heart art brings independence.*

**A** At age 48, Heidi Pitre is just now starting her life as the type of artist she has always wanted to be. "I have raised two daughters and set them out on their own. It's time for me to be the same kind of independent woman I have encouraged them to be," she said.

That brassy streak of independence is evident in Heidi's colorful artwork. As a matter of fact, one of the figures in a series of her paintings is a Rosie-the-Riveter-type character with a never-fading look of determination on her face.

"That series started with me wanting to paint something with big yellow rubber gloves," Heidi said. "That kind of evolved to a brave woman with attitude and a blow torch."

It's easy to assume the subject in the painting is Heidi.

"I wanted to feel 'connected' to my work, so I started out by putting myself in the paintings. But it was all the other elements, I realized, that were me. I really like the character. She knows she

can handle things if she needs to, and yeah, I suppose that's a lot like me."

Heidi grew up in New Orleans, a place she left when she was 40 years old until moving to Bay St. Louis – five weeks before Hurricane Katrina hit.

"I lost everything, but that made me move to Hattiesburg. I had two teenaged daughters and we had to settle somewhere. As it turns out, Hattiesburg had everything that I was looking for when I moved to Bay St. Louis."

Her art career began early in life.

"As a child, a friend of my parents was over. I knew he was an artist, so I traced a cover of a Charlie Brown coloring book and he called me on it. He told me that I could draw it on my own, and I did. I felt powerful, amazed that I could do that."

She didn't last long in private drawing lessons because the fundamentals bored her. She didn't fare much better in high





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— Charles Price, owner,  
Oddfellows Gallery

school art classes. Heidi went on to study at the University of New Orleans but dropped out after the first semester. Coerced by a friend to attend Delgado College in New Orleans, she found a perfect fit in the school's art department.

“The instructors there saw my potential, and they really encouraged and nurtured me.” Heidi went on to earn a bachelor's of fine arts from UNO with a concentration in painting.

After graduation, she worked for 10 years at a sign company.

“It was a steady job, and I was able to work and raise my two daughters on my own. I did commission work on the side and then some freelance. I started out doing dog portraits, which I still do, and that was a lot of fun.”

Heidi's dog portraits are personalized for each owner, with the owner's home or other personal items in the background.

“Something new is wedding gifts, with the bride's and groom's dogs painted together. I've even done some as save-the-date cards, with the bride's and groom's feet in the portrait with the dogs. Pet portraits have always been a fun way for me to supplement my income,” she said.

Heidi looks at herself as realistic, but not a realist, and feminine, but not a feminist. She paints on large canvases using bold, rich color.

“When I'm painting, I want to have an element of humor, but not in-your-face. It's more subtle,” she said.

When she first created a workspace for herself in 2004, she painted





a piece called *Constant Craving*, a somewhat disguised self-portrait of a naked woman crawling on a wire grid, reaching precariously for a creamy, pink cupcake.

"It can be interpreted as a commentary on the discomfort that women go through, the temptations and yearnings we have," she said. "But sometimes, it's just a snapshot of a woman and a cupcake!"

Heidi's studio is off the kitchen of her kitschy little cottage she shares with her dog, Lula, in Hattiesburg. Full of windows, the small studio is filled with light.

"I love it. I once had a studio in a basement with no windows," she said. "I had plenty of room to spread out, but it was so dark. I would rather have a small, workable studio with plenty of light. I'm perfectly happy here!"

The home is filled with her large-format canvases hanging in each room amid vintage furnishings and accessories. Her eyes light up when asked about what's coming next.

"I'm fascinated with childhood, and my next series will be scenes from my own childhood. I had a very interesting upbringing, so I'm excited about the series," she said.

Heidi will fund her next series through a recent Artist Fellowship from the Mississippi Arts Commission. The agency awards fellowships of up to \$5,000 in several categories each year to professional artists living and working in Mississippi. The awards are based on merit and are highly competitive.

"I was awarded a mini-grant last year, which was great, but this is really big. I'll be able to purchase all the canvases and supplies for the series thanks to this fellowship. I'm so grateful that I live where the arts are appreciated. I'm also very active in the Hattiesburg Arts Council, where I'm serving as the new president. The director of the Council, Rebekah Johnson, has done amazing things in this community. She's responsible for

making the art community in Hattiesburg blossom."

Heidi also was selected as the artist for the FestivalSouth in Hattiesburg this year. The multi-week music and arts festival is one of the area's largest festivals.

"I wanted to highlight Mississippi as being the birthplace of American music. That's where my whole music series stemmed from. I wanted to highlight that because music that comes out of Mississippi is so uninhibited, and I am a big lover of good music."

As artist for the festival, Heidi displayed her work in Oddfellows Gallery in downtown Hattiesburg.

"It was very well received," said gallery owner Charles Price. "Heidi is a very talented, creative and imaginative artist. She has amazing skills to do what she wants to do in a painting. It is painstakingly slow work, adding layer upon layer to get the desired look. She really knows her craft."

More and more people are taking notice of Heidi's amazing artwork. For the third year in a row, her work has been accepted for The Cedars Juried Art Exhibition in Jackson. Her piece won Best of Show at the 2012 inaugural exhibition, and in 2013, she was awarded a month-long art residency at Seaside.

With the same look of determination on her face as the character in many of her paintings, Heidi plans to find more galleries to showcase her art. The young-at-heart artist has started this new phase of her life on her own terms, and she couldn't be happier.

"I'm in a good place, and I like where life is taking me," she said.

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