

World Muse

Local artist inspired by European masters

BY KRISTINE HARTVIGSEN
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF ALICIA LEEKE AND BY
KRISTINE HARTVIGSEN



Courtesy of Alicia Leeke

Panoramic views of Paris from Montmartre proved irresistible for Alicia Leeke, inspiring a life-changing exodus from corporate life to the artist's life.

Gazing down on Parisians strolling with their dogs, on schoolchildren playing along the famous hill's staggered steps, on the distant, illuminated Eiffel Tower at dusk,

Leeke let her imagination take flight. As an artist, she remains especially interested in the visual subtext outside of a scene's direct focus. Those details, imagined or realized, influence the mood, color choice, line, and philosophy of Leeke's intimate compositions.

"I am very inspired by the old masters," Leeke said, "but I want to replace the Old World feel and make it more contemporary."

Having visited Paris and the Louvre, most recently in 2005, Leeke has painstakingly captured hundreds of photographs of buildings and street scenes for reference. She admires post-impressionist and Fauves movement artists who experimented with abstraction. Her favorites include Toulouse-Lautrec, Raoul Dufy, Claude Monet, Gustav Klimt, Edgar Degas, and Maurice Utrillo.

"I study art history and read biographies of other artists and try to find out how they were inspired," Leeke said. "Everything builds and constantly changes and morphs into something else."

Leeke often describes her

process and style as "constructionist," in which she puts together images based on her studies and experiences, as well as abstracting from the selected work of others. The creative experiments become homages that transform and evolve until they are entirely Leeke's.

"I try to put my twist on it so that it builds from what someone else has done," Leeke said. "The one defining thing you will see in all my work is a lot of heavy black lines and a distorted perspective. My subjects aren't supposed to look exactly real. That is what makes the images distinctive."

"I like to see how other artists paint," she continued. "I am very inspired by Degas' ballerinas. I wanted to do something of my own that would tie in with the ballerinas."

Leeke did, creating a series of popular ballet-themed compositions. A supporter of local ballet, Leeke donates a portion of sales from her own ballerina series to Columbia Classical Ballet. The paintings are unique yet share elements from the Degas color palette.

"I am drawn to bright, vibrant color. I go through phases with colors that are my favorites," she said. "One right now is French blue, inspired by Degas. I love French blue and brown and pink. I add

Leeke admires post-impressionist artists who experimented with abstraction, including Edgar Degas, whose ballerina series inspired Leeke's own interpretation (above).



Kristine Hartvigsen

pink as a complementary color.”

Flexibility is essential in Leeke’s self-described constructionist style, and she feels completely free to roam where the creative energy directs her.

“Sometimes I will see something in the paint. What I intend to be a landscape may change into a little vignette,” she explained. And because she has amassed a considerable body of work herself, her own portfolio is game. “Sometimes I even try to abstract some of my own work.”

In the spirit of Monet’s famed paintings of the Cathedral at Rouen, Leeke now is working on a series of paintings of Notre Dame, each at a different time of day. She’s also developing a series on Columbia’s own Trinity Cathedral. Leeke said she loves churches and cathedrals as subjects because they exude lots of subtle color to draw from.

Having completed several South Carolina scenes, particularly older rural or historic structures, Leeke also has immortalized on canvas several familiar

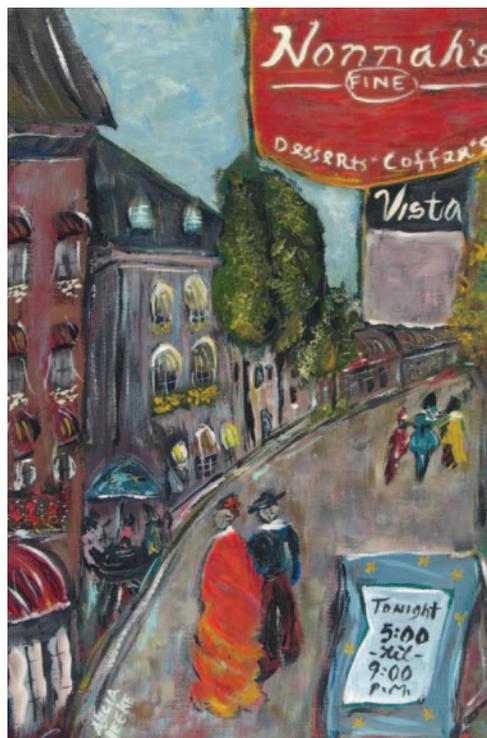
Below: ‘Exotic Palm’ by Alicia Leeke. Upper left: ‘Nonnah’s’ by Alicia Leeke.

buildings in the downtown Vista, including an exterior of Nonnah’s on Gervais Street and the Art Bar on Park Street. She’s now in the process of giving the Mellow Mushroom restaurant in the Vista her personal visual accent.

Leeke began college as a painter majoring in fine art but switched to journalism, a degree that led her into corporate communications and graphic design. She served as an art director for the state Department of Health and Environmental Control for six years.

Over the years, Leeke has cultivated a naturally keen mind for business. She has established a spacious studio and showroom in her Forest Acres home on a pond populated by blue heron and Canada geese. More often than not, she paints outside on her patio in natural sunlight. It’s an idyllic, meditative setting in which to prepare for a rigorous show schedule ahead.

To be sure, Leeke has more ideas than she has time to implement. She’s constantly developing product lines that include greeting cards, a children’s coloring book



Courtesy of Alicia Leeke

(slated for 2009), mouse pads, monotypes (painted images transferred onto fabric), and hand-colored silk scarves.

“I am fortunate that I am diversified and can do a lot of different things,” Leeke said. “Because of my business background, I understand that you need variety.”

In addition to participating in more exhibitions, Leeke has been testing the waters of the wholesale market, working in tandem with home design professionals. Fontenay Gallery in Columbia has placed more than 100 of Leeke’s works in local homes and offices. Every year, she reads the latest color trends in home design and develops mostly abstract products to fit that niche. She’s also constantly upgrading her Web site — www.alicialeeke.com — so customers can stay informed about her latest products.

Leeke is excited about a future in which she is creatively engaged and, through savvy entrepreneurship, financially secure.

“Art is my passion. It is fun, and it is relaxing, but art is also a business,” she said. “You have to determine who your audience is and why you are doing it and know the distribution. You have to have tenacity and absolute perseverance. It is not an easy industry. It is one of the most difficult jobs that there is.” **LMC**



Courtesy of Alicia Leeke