

COMMUNITY PROFILE: WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH



Beach People:

Nicole Kennedy paints Wrightsville Beach-goers

In a brilliant cerulean sky, a formation of pelicans dip low; you shade your eyes and catch a distant glimpse of kite surfers teasing the horizon. You notice the sweet aroma of coconut or pineapple in the heady mix of the ocean air, and your skin tingles with salt, sand and sun, just as you jump up to catch a perfect throw.

The combination of your natural talent and a lovely breeze takes your Frisbee in a crescent curve out over the breaking surf. It sails past a group of carefree people constructing an intricate sand castle, over a rainbow-striped beach umbrella, and right into the hand of the girl you think you might love, who catches it behind her back. This is a moment you wish would last forever.

In an inventive series, fittingly entitled "Endless Summer," Raleigh-based artist Nicole Kennedy captures perfect moments on Wrightsville Beach. After many weekends whiling away the time by reading books on the beach, Kennedy now uses whatever means necessary to catch the movement of unsuspecting beachgoers whose self-consciousness has washed away with the tide.

"I prefer painting their 'in the now' moments because they have a truth to them that posing subjects don't convey," she shares. "The whole point of painting the beachgoers incognito is that they strike natural poses and let their inhibitions down."

Usually cloaked under a beach umbrella, Kennedy might do a quick sketch behind the cover of a magazine, or she might snap pictures on her five-megapixel digital camera, as a way of getting the raw material she needs to create her work.

Kennedy describes how she gets from sketch or photo to painting: "Back in the studio, I study the pictures by pinning everything on a board that I can look at for a while. I actually look for the painting in the photos and see it in my head before I start. Once I have put paint to board, the art takes off in its own direction."

Though known primarily for her oil-on-canvas paintings of Italy, done with a palette knife, the artist works in acrylic for her "beach people" series. Clayboard or masonite creates a smooth surface that allows the painter to add layer upon layer of paint, "adding swirls, angles and design elements to tie the subject to his/her surroundings."

Growing up in Connecticut on the New York border, Kennedy's family was supportive of her artistic tendencies. "I had natural artistic abilities which my parents nurtured. Our home was also filled with original art that my dad collected overseas during WWII and from illustrators whom he represented in NYC at that time. Books [and] magazines on art, architecture and photography were usually scattered about the house. I have been drawing since four years old, so pursuing the arts was never frowned upon and in my case...a given."

She began her formal training before college, under the direction of a high school art teacher who had a MFA from Yale. From there, she went on to study commercial art at Parsons School of Design in NYC and later to the School of Visual Art.

Her professional background is rooted in the art direction of TV commercials for a New York City ad firm, where she spent 15 years, eventually working her way up to vice-president. Things changed for Kennedy when she made a move to Raleigh. The North Carolina lifestyle invited her to focus fully on her artistic side. Five years ago she opened Nicole's Studio & Art Gallery, where the painter regularly exhibits, represents other area artists and holds art classes.

Most of the time Kennedy remains incognito as she gathers the data she needs to recreate beach scenes. "Teenagers and adults tend to be lost in their own world," she says, but sometimes a curious child will blow her cover. The painter only recalls one experience in which the subject of a painting identified herself. "A woman recognized herself walking her three dogs and emailed me to purchase the art (it had already sold, so I made her a print)." It might be difficult for a person to make a positive identification, as the paintings lend themselves to the abstract. "Generally, I don't paint people straight on. In some cases I change the art so you would never know. But often, the subjects can recognize themselves by either their bathing suits, surf board graphics, groups of three walking, the book they are reading, or specific clothing. More often I have people who think the image is someone they know and others send me their photos hoping I might paint them."

Kennedy is never at a loss for what to paint. "There is just so much to paint and so much inspiration that I have amassed enough reference to paint Wrightsville Beach people for the rest of my life, even if I never went to the beach again!" In all likelihood, she will go back, and just maybe she will capture your perfect moment.

You might not know for certain whether it's really you, but you might see the essence of a beach moment you remember at New Elements Gallery. The gallery is hosting some of the most recent works in Nicole Kennedy's beach people series in an exhibit called "Water Works." The show will also include works of acclaimed Raleigh artist, Bob Rankin, and will be on display at New Elements throughout the summer. They can also be viewed at Nicole's Studio & Art Gallery in Raleigh or online at www.nicolestudio.com

