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# Sarasota Arts & LIVING



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SARASOTA'S BEST SOURCE FOR ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

## Katharine Butler: the artist's way

BY KAREN MAMONE

Every once in a while, a customer will come into Katharine Butler's Towles Court gallery and asks where the chairs have gone.

In the 1990s, the 58-year old artist, who calls both Sarasota and her native New York home, did several evocative studies that explored the idea of comfort and belonging by picturing cozy front porch chairs looking as if their contented inhabitants had just gotten up for a moment.

For a while, she was fascinated by mailboxes, especially those weather-worn ones seen on country roads.

And then, there were the boats: a two-year cycle of works executed in watercolor, acrylic, wood and paper, and various complex methods of printmaking. In them, a solitary skiff floats calmly in sea of turbulent pattern or drifts in a netherland of implicit danger.

The boat shape is, for her, basically a joyful symbol, she said, representative of the individual's fragile "but indomitable place in the vast mystery of the world."

But in 2004, she saw the boats as a metaphor for the balance of power in the world, and what happens when that balance is lost. That exhibit's complete name was "Beached in Baghdad."

Last year, she continued the series and expanded both the boat image and the methods she used to look at the journeys that all lives take; paths that call for courage, patience, hope, faith and determination. Some of these works are called by names that reveal Butler's background as an English literature major, such as "Floating in my Mother's Womb," "Reflections (Narcissus)," "Veiled Truths" and "Leap of Faith."

The boats were an idea she explored, sometimes in thematic treatments triggered by headlines, and in various techniques and manipulations of the printing process triggered by her own restless creativity. When Butler felt she had said and done all that she wanted to, she moved on to another series.

It's called the artistic process. It's what allows "wonderful discoveries to take place in the studio that, for me, make art my reason and passion," she says. "If art is not magical and full of surprises, I'm just not interested."

Meanwhile, our friend is still



Katharine Butler relaxes in her studio. The artist is currently displaying her latest work at her eponymous Towles Court gallery.

looking for the chairs. She wishes him well, but suggests he look elsewhere.

Butler's newest works are displayed in the gallery's current show, which runs through April 8. This time, she has focused on natural forms, and the timeless progression of the seasons.

This work is inspired, she says, "by the seasons of life, the climate of growth or rest, the time of decay leading into the fecund possibility of rebirth and nourishment, or, as in the case of the tropics, the idea of decay and growth co-existing in symbiotic relationship with no heed to season."

It started during a trip to New York City's Central Park. She gathered some leaves she found there, and rubber-cemented them to a copper plate, which she put into an acid solution. For weeks, she played like a kid with a new toy – adding paint, ink and watercolor; using laminated papers in a method called *chin colle*.

In it, very thin papers are com-

pressed onto the printing surface. Normally, a rice paper application is placed on top of the prepared and inked plate, and applied with a thin glue or cellulose. When the edition is made, the glue adheres to the printing, making paper, and the image is transferred to the collage paper, as well. The two papers become one when they are rolled through the press.

But this is no precise art. Like a pot in a kiln, each print is part plan and part accident; part intent and part mystery. After dozen of prints were made of one subject, Butler framed just eight of them.

Trees, branches, leaves, skies in different settings and seasons comprise her subject matter. Sometimes, an image is done in multiple seasonal versions. Occasionally, a pair of images form a double dance like a pair of twins – alike in some ways, but very different in others.

Of course, the symbolism of decay and rebirth is implicit, but Butler says she also honors "the triumphant will of nature over all. Even at rest, in the dead of winter, the structure, 'the bones' are there, ready with the nod of natural forces to recapture the flamboyancy of life without a care for man or machine."

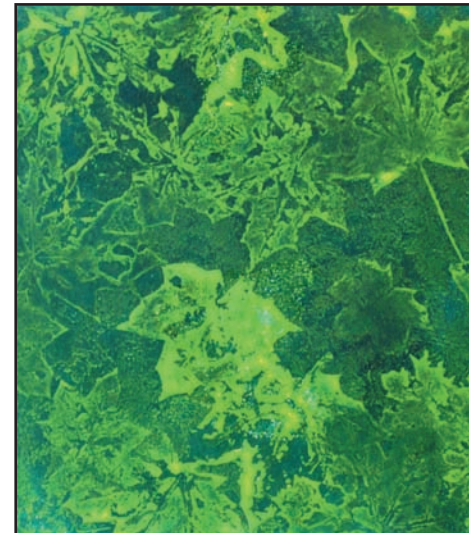
Throughout the year, Butler's Morrill Street gallery mounts exhibits of 17 or so artists of regional and national reputation. Once a year, her own new works are featured. That is one of the few occasions in which Butler uses her full name; Katharine Cosenza Butler.

### WHEN YOU GO

▼ New work by Katharine Cosenza Butler runs through April 8 at the Katharine Butler Gallery in Towles Court, 1943 Morrill St.

▼ The artist's reception is March 17, from 6-10 p.m.

▼ The gallery is open Tuesday-Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; For more information, log onto [kbutlertgallery.com](http://kbutlertgallery.com).



"Full Summer"

For much of her childhood, she had only the vaguest notions of any Italian heritage, Cosenza being both a province and a city in southern Italy. It seems her late father had changed his name to "Latham" a suitably WASP-ish moniker deemed more acceptable for his aspirations.

When her parents divorced, the connection became even more remote. Later, when she tracked down her roots, she discovered that she was a member of a proud family of artists that went back to great-grandfather Guiseppe Cosenza.

Butler opened her Sarasota gallery in 1997, and for 10 years also owned a Deer Island, Maine gallery, which she sold last year. She continues to visit Maine in the summer, as she has for the past 30 years.

Her education took her to the University of Wisconsin and the San Francisco Art Institute, where she earned an honors degree in printmaking and where her son, Luke Butler, was born in 1971.

Nono Guiseppe would be happy to know that Luke is a painter, as well as a collage artist. He has participated in many group shows, and this year is part of "Restless

Natives," a show at Local Projects in Long Island City of work by native New Yorkers, and in "Ides of March" at ABCNoRio. Luke lives and works in Brooklyn.

Katharine Butler has been a professional artist for nearly four decades, and has had exhibits in Florida; California; Washington, D.C.; Maine; and Italy. Butler's work also was included in a traveling exhibit of the Smithsonian Institution, and in a volume on "The Power of Feminist Art."

She, too, has been a "restless native" who has followed her own path in her work and in her life. In 1976, she was soaking paper in turpentine and applying pastels like finger paints.

"I felt like I had invented it,"

Thirty years later, Butler is still inventing new ways to convey the inspiration that she takes from American culture and politics, from nature, from her own experience, and from the emotional climate of our times.

Her work often contains haunting images and beauty and vitality in color and form, but she is not interested in just creating pretty pictures.

"That's decor," she says. "Life is so flat if you don't take chances."



"Double Dance II"



"Sola"