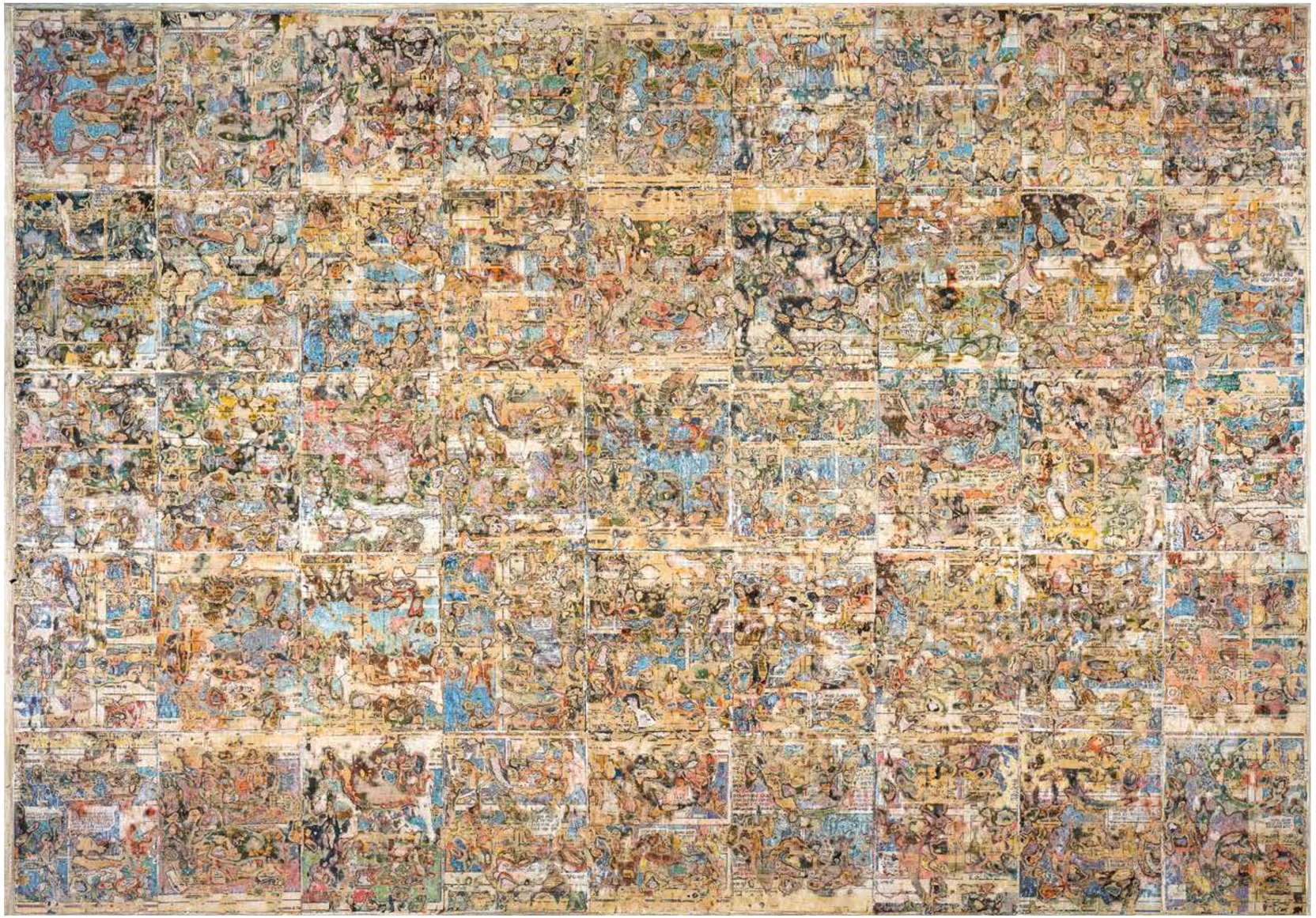
Portrait of an *Artist*

A Visit with Gail Hillow Watkins

by Mary Lou Baker | Photography courtesy of Gail Hillow Watkins

"Women on the Verge" was the title of a recent article in the Wall Street Journal about the increasing recognition of female artists. Perhaps no one personifies that more than Annapolis artist Gail Hillow Watkins. Her intricate canvases have been exhibited in galleries worldwide in addition to numerous private and corporate collections (including Fannie Mae Headquarters, the Greater Baltimore Medical Center, the Hyatt and the Hilton corporations). Recently she was commissioned for a special exhibit at the National Institutes of Health, marking the 60th anniversary of the discovery of DNA.



Opposite: Gail Hillow Watkins in front of her painting entitled "*Etruscan,*" 72" x 96". **Above:** "*Burano,*" 35" x 51".

Above: "*Labrador Duck*," 18" x 12", mixed media on paper.

Above: "*Lost*,"31" x 46".

While Watkins taught for many years at St. Johns College and served on the board of its Mitchell Art Gallery, her artistic achievements include museum exhibitions, solo shows, group exhibitions, and commissioned works (25 and counting). Her canvases have hung in galleries in Italy, Egypt, Turkey, the Czech Republic; and the American Embassies in Israel and Egypt. Two of her paintings are in the permanent collection of American University's Watkins Gallery (no relation).

The artist's intensive research on subjects ranging from extinct animal and sea life to ancient artifacts and scientific discoveries is evident throughout her body of work. "While researching for the NIH exhibit, I became enchanted by the shapes of chromosomes," she says. "And when I learned that 2013 marks the 60th anniversary of the discovery of DNA, I decided to dedicate my exhibit to that discovery. The strings of chromosomes, called karotypes, determine the make-up of all organisms—but for me, artistically, they represent calligraphy, ancient writing, even primitive drawings of man," she says.

Watkins has worked from her studio overlooking the Severn River since moving here in the '70s as the young bride of Annapolis oncologist Dr. Stanley Watkins. I have known the artist since our children played together. While I have always been awed by her talent and work ethic, I lacked an understanding of the scope of her work or what was involved in its execution until researching for this article.

Who knew?

What I do know is that we remained friends, even after I unintentionally drove over a 6 x 8 canvas drying in her driveway. She soothed my hysteria with kindness, saying my tire marks might add interest to her piece. She said the noted Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg had incorporated tractor tracks on one of his more famous artworks and that my tire marks might add interest to her piece. Sure enough, when the show opened the next night at the Franz Bader Gallery in Washington, D.C., guests seemed fascinated by this serendipitous feature.

From left: *"Eastern Bison,"* 12" x 12". *"Fossil,"* 12" x 12". *"Carolina Parakeet,"* 12" x 12". *"Fish,"* 12" x 12".

And I knew her as a world traveler, including annual "sabbaticals" in Italy, where she studied. For several years Watkins was an artist-in residence at the University of Georgia's summer program in Cortona, where she fell in love with the country's artistic heritage. The patterned ceilings, frescos and relics, including the Etruscan tombs inspired a massive painting hanging in her dining room.

She and her husband traveled to Egypt, where the country's ancient culture added to her fascination with the themes of rebirth and regeneration. As guests of Ned Walker, former American Ambassador to Egypt, they had V.I.P. access to the vestiges of this ancient civilization, visiting pyramids, museums and tombs decorated with friezes and hieroglyphics—images that have appeared in her work throughout the years.

Her family and friends know Watkins as a serious artist, committed to a structured working regimen. Her husband calls her "part alchemist" and her daughter Elizabeth pegs her as "a bio-artist," a reference to the animals and fish Watkins often paints. Dr. Watkins was especially proud of his wife's NIH exhibit, featuring major medical and scientific milestones, and Elizabeth was drawn to a series called "Status X," that feature images of extinct fish and wildlife.

In recent years, Watkins's work entered a totally original orbit--her "comic book phase." Friends passed along comics pages from the Baltimore Sun and Washington Post, which became fodder for the artist's transformation into art. The technique involves layering and gluing as many as six sheets to a board and topping them with a plastic template. She plays with paint colors, applies acrylic, and uses wire brushes, sandpaper, boiling water and graffiti to score the surface to reveal the images that reveal themselves. It is, she says, a "mysterious process."

The results are an amalgam of subtle colors and images on canvases shaped to fit geometric grids and, in some cases, arched frames. Her art is the product of Watkins's intelligence, eclectic life experiences, passion for her profession and a willingness to allow her imagination to run free.

Watkins' merges the old and the new to convey the illusive essence of time and the past with the present. Her technique is similar to the "pasted paper" technique introduced in 1912 by artist Georges Braque, considered the father of the mixed-media movement characterizing much of modern art. Critics of this technique complain of its randomness, but Watkins's use of geometric grids gives form and discipline to the intricate patterns they contain.

Watkins cites Pablo Picasso as her favorite modern artist and considers his Guernica to be "the greatest painting of the twentieth century." Other artists to whom she feels "indebted" range from early Renaissance Masters Piero Della Francesca and Giotto di Bondone to Henri Matisse and New York School abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Koening.

Her own art, as it has evolved over the past forty years, asks the viewer to stop, look and think. Her painstaking layering of linen, paper, glue, paint and acrylic demands mindfulness. The reward lies in the glimpses of hidden faces, figures, animals, sea creatures and symbols that are revealed to the attentive eye.

Her studio is a very private area, a self-described "mess" where she spent many hours a day—except in spring and fall when she would often spread a canvas in the driveway and literally dance around it as she worked.

When a show is coming up, she retreats to her studio, her refuge and private space. So I felt privileged to climb the steep steps to the small building, holding on to a tree trunk as I swung around to the door landing. Watkins showed me a box of the small wooden icon-shaped frames she builds herself, stretching the canvas to create the arched shape that has distinguished religious artifacts through the years. Her husband stretches larger canvases on frames he makes in his garage workshop.

Above: *"Bayeaux,"* 28" x 36", mixed media on canvas.

With reverence, Watkins opened a drawer holding vials of pure powdered pigments which she orders from Zecchi in Florence, the world's oldest art supply shop. Most are earth-toned in the subtle palette that distinguishes her work, which is sometimes flecked with the gold she also uses to "frame" her miniature icons.

In addition to an enormous worktable, Watkins has five sanders and two heat tables with overhead drying bulbs. Light filters through six small apertures high on one wall. Three large windows overlook treetops and the river beyond. Traces of the artist-at-work are everywhere, even on the soles of her sneakers, where random bits of canvas and paint form a colorful pattern.

Watkins's work is on display through July at the Winn Bone Gallery in Annapolis and represented in a three-woman show in Manhattan, where she is a respected member of that city's art scene. "Gail Hillow Watkins is an artist of unusual talent and tenacity," writes noted New York art critic Jonathan Goodman. "The sum effect of Watkins' artful composition, abrasure and then burnishing of her surfaces is reminiscent of a highly patterned imagery – the complex patterns of Islamic art come to mind."

"In the cycle of history, the new is created from the old," says Watkins. "It is this natural process of formation and dissolution that inspires me."