A House that Sings

By Laura Jean Whitcomb
Photography by Jesse Baker

As Carol Santa Maria describes her creative process, you can almost picture her working away in her studio with mad-scientist glee. Scissors frantically snip, snip, snipping paper from all over the world — perhaps a transparent piece of rice paper from Japan or a rich, deep red paper with gold details from China. Small pieces fly as she cuts this one and that one, then 12 hours later — with a lightning bolt and a cry of “it’s alive!” — she has completed her latest work of art: six musicians playing colorful instruments in a collage titled, “Thelonious Monk Said There Are No Wrong Notes.”

Although her studio does end up covered with paper, the creation of her art doesn’t really happen that way. “I spend hours choosing a piece of paper,” the Windsor, Vt., artist says. “If it doesn’t look right, I can’t stand it. If you watched me you’d say, ‘Just glue it already!’”

But Santa Maria is the master of her medium — paper — and knows how to control the flow of the lines to create a 16-by-20 (and sometimes larger) work of cut paper drawings.

LIFE OVERSEAS

After college in Vermont, Santa Maria traveled to Togo, West Africa, with the Peace Corps. For three years, she taught a variety of arts and crafts at the leper colony in Niamtougou. Then she lived in Mexico for two decades, teaching English in schools. She also created a co-op with a friend, designing T-shirts that were embroidered by women in prison. “It was a way for them to make money,” Santa Maria says.

It was a big change from the cold climes and sometimes just-as-cold Yankee personalities that she grew up with, but Santa Maria thrived. She speaks of a warm, tropical climate filled with bright colors, sounds and smells. She remembers dancing in streets. She talks about a culture where children are celebrated. She describes a traditional greeting where people say, “My heart is open to you.” And it is her life in West Africa and Mexico that flows into her art.

“I hope to bring people into some-

continued on PAGE 68
thing different, something colorful,” she says. Her work usually depicts people of color — Latinos and African Americans — and, most often, women. “It is women’s art; women enjoy it,” she says. “If they look at it and it makes them happy, that’s my contribution to world peace.”

She’s joking, but her three-dimensional paper art does make you feel peaceful, transporting you to “happy places” in different cultures. “Songlines” shows two women hanging laundry on three clotheslines, but gently reminds the viewer to find joy in mundane daily tasks. On a hot, summer day, waiting for public transportation could be sheer torture, but Santa Maria depicts it as joyous in “Waiting for the Bus.” Five women — each holding something different in their arms — could be bringing their flowers, watermelon and jars of water to a celebration on the outskirts of town. The paper is folded, bent and cut in such a way that you can almost hear the white laundry flapping in the breeze, or feel the cool of the blue water as it splashes out of the clay jug.

“I have worked with paper long enough that I can sense where it wants to go,” she says. “Sometimes it falls into place in ways I could not have imagined.”

**INSPIRATION**

The Huichol Indians reside in scattered villages throughout central Mexico. They are a small group, about 15,000 remain, and they hold on to their tribe’s traditions, which date back to the days before European influence.

Santa Maria grew to love the Huichol Indians during the 20 years she lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico. And she was fascinated by their yarn paintings. “They pressed strands of colored yarn into beeswax on a board to make these very intricate paintings,” she says, “but they only made them after having a vision.” In fact, according to Dance of the Deer Foundation, it is an unspoken law in the Huichol tradition that before one can make any piece of art, they must have either a dream or a vision of the designs they plan to use.

Santa Maria doesn’t use a peyote-induced vision, and she uses paper instead of yarn, but it’s a similar concept. “I began using paper because I loved the textures, the variety of designs and the range of colors. I could also use it in layers, much like the Huichol art, which does not layer in the same sense, but has a main design and is then ‘outlined,’” she says.

At the time, she was writing children’s books about Africa and Mexico, “countries filled with a pandemonium of light and color,” she says. “I made paper illustrations. They were less sophisticated then — there was little layering, little contrast, no three-dimensional folding. At that point I was more interested in making sure people understood the culture and traditions.”

The books weren’t published, but when Santa Maria returned to the states,
a friend happened upon the dummies. “She showed them to people she knew in publishing, and they all liked the art,” she says. “I was discouraged about not selling my work as books, but my friend suggested I try selling the art at the Cornish Fair.”

A LOCAL SHOW

And why not? The Cornish Fair has always supported local — from businesses to farmers to artists — and Santa Maria was a native of Windsor, located a covered bridge away from Cornish, N.H. The fair’s annual art show is held.
in the town hall, and, for a fee of $10 and a small percentage of sales, is open to all artists who want to sell their work.

“It’s small, local and didn’t seem too intimidating to me at the time. What did I have to lose?” she says. “But I can remember walking across the threshold of the building where the art would be displayed thinking, ‘They are going to think these are so stupid.’”

It was just the opposite. In 2008, she brought six cut paper drawings and sold three. In 2009, she sold all 10.

“It was at the Cornish Fair that I first saw Carol Santa Maria’s work and purchased one of her vivid and lyrical cut and folded paper paintings,” says Linda Hammond, a Cornish, N.H., resident. “Her colors and shapes seem to sing songs and dance joy.”

“Her work is unlike anything I have ever seen,” says Andrea Nogueron of Windsor, Vt., who also saw Santa Maria’s work at the fair. “She folded and bent layers of paper in flowing skirts and wonderful landscapes.”

After the second Cornish Fair Art Show, Santa Maria submitted her work to AVA Gallery and Art Center’s juried art show.

A TRIBUTE

It’s the opening night of her show at AVA, and Santa Maria doesn’t look nervous. For someone who loves color,
she is surprisingly dressed in black and white. Perhaps it’s to keep your attention is focused on the 20-plus pieces of art hanging on the white walls of Gallery 3 instead of the artist.

It works to some extent, but her art is unique and people seek Santa Maria out for answers to their questions. She uses papers from around the globe — her favorite paper store is in New York — and special orders glue made for archival restorations from Oregon. She’ll work on a piece 8 to 12 hours a day for a week or two, depending on the complexity, and only works in the light of day. “It makes a difference when you need to see shade variation,” she says.

She considers the texture, the colors, the contrast. And the glue, oh, how the glue can change her mind. “I lay the paper down, but don’t glue it all at once. I have to think, ‘What is this piece going to look like glued down?’ Sometimes when I glue it on, I have to be careful because it may not look the same way. I may start out with one thing in mind and then something completely different comes out.”

As her art becomes better known around the Upper Valley, two things have not changed. The first: “I hope people look at my art and it makes them happy.” And, the second, her love of the Mexican and African cultures: “They continue to be my teachers,” Santa Maria says. “I like to think my art passes their stories along in new ways and repays their loving kindness.”

“Under the Spell of Seashells”