

# Plein Aire Artist Preserves the *Nature of Newport*

BY SUZY CASEY

Local artist NC Swan, also known as Nancy, was a member of Corona del Mar High School's first graduating class in 1962. Her desire to capture landmarks stems from her years of growing up in a community that rapidly changed during her youth.

We talk about her formative years as an artist one rainy afternoon in her studio that is awash with light. In her teen years, she rode the bus daily to CDMHS passing by herds of cattle grazing on the peninsula. Her memories of the sun's effect on white piles of salt at the old salt works remained long after storms had washed it all away. She left Newport Beach to follow her husband, Peer, in the military at the time. They returned home and when she saw how much of the original landscape had changed, her desire to capture the Newport Beach of her youth was born. "Landmarks tell the history of a community," says Nancy. "They are often used to give directions. Landmarks are a way for people to get their bearings."

Landscape scenes characterize NC Swan's work; Plein aire, defined as the art of painting directly from nature, has been a major focus. As we tour the studio, she talks about the process of creating her art. One wall of her studio is lined with full length cabinets containing art works that range from plein aire water colors depicting the

Newport Beach of yesteryear to a digital children's book of illustrations.

NC Swan is a self-taught artist who learned techniques by studying the masters. When she wanted to learn how to etch, she studied Rembrandt's technique. At that time, she was a new bride and her husband had just been deployed to Vietnam. She had lots of time alone. "I found out where to purchase the same kind of materials that Rembrandt used which included copperplate and nitric acid. And then I just started etching." For years, she sold her etchings in Newport Beach galleries. Though many landmarks have changed or vanished, Nancy has much of Newport's history preserved on copperplates.

With the dawn of computer technology, NC Swan expanded her focus to include graphic design and book illustrations. "I fell in love with the computer and taught myself every art and design software available. At that time, my kids were little. The computer enabled me to do many revisions at a much faster rate." Her studio houses an impressive array of equipment including computers, printers, a digitizer board and pressure sensitive mouse, large screens, scanners plus stacks of software and hardware instruction manuals.

Her newest work, an anthology of children's plays, is techno-driven. She uses terms like 'bit maps' and 'black vector image outlines'—terms familiar to techno-savvy artists. "I believe I can and should use





every medium at my disposal. That's what artists have done from the beginning," says Nancy. Like many artisans, NC Swan suffers from perfectionism which means she will stay up all night pursuing her artistic vision.

Once the image of what she wants to produce conforms to her vision, she is ready to paint. And paint it she does in colors that shine, shimmer, dance, brood, reflect, memorialize and tell a story.

Though she retains a youthful look—red hair, lively brown eyes, slim figure and sprinkle of freckles—NC Swan has been an artist for over half a century. Watercolor remains her favorite medium. We mention the watercolor cover she was commissioned to do for *Location's*

holiday issue. This leads her into a mini-tutorial about the properties of watercolors. She explains how color pigments flow together and dry with fringe effects due to each pigment's specific gravity. "I let each color do its own thing," she says.

With etching also a favored medium, NC Swan compares the two. "Technique-wise, they are opposites. Etching demands complete control. In watercolor painting, the artist has pure freedom!" 📖

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