



'Elation and disbelief:' Shelton artist's work earns prominent placement in Rome, Washington, D.C.

By **Brian Gioiele**

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Jill Nichols poses in front of her painting 'Juno' in her home and studio in Shelton, Conn. Jan. 22, 2021. A copy of the painting currently hangs in the Vatican Observatory Museum.

Photo: Ned Gerard / Hearst Connecticut Media

SHELTON — Jill Harrington Nichols does not remember a time when she did not love creating art. One of her first artistic forays was creating a tiger's head with colored gravel — which her parents hung above the stove when she was 5.

How far Nichols has come.

The Shelton artist now has two paintings — titled “Phi” and “Juno” — both created to celebrate the Cosmos and the sacred feminine hanging in the Vatican Observatory, an astronomical research and educational institution at the opposite end of the papal gardens from the former Pope’s summer residence in Vatican City. The observatory, within the borders of Castel Gandolfo, is one of the properties of the Holy See.

Other paintings sit in the collection of former FBI Director James Comey: “Washington D.C.,” most notably seen as the backdrop during his interview on “Face the Nation,” and “The Grand Canyon,” installed in Comey’s office and shown in scenes in Showtime’s “The Comey Rule.”

Yet another of Nichols’ paintings, “Weir Farm Summer's Day,” recently received an award from the U.S. Department of the Interior.

And those are just the ones earning international acclaim. Nichols has numerous other paintings prominently displayed in homes and businesses locally and farther afield.

“When I see my work prominently displayed, I feel a mixture of elation and disbelief,” Nichols, currently an adjunct professor at the University of New Haven, said. “When my art was chosen to be installed in the Vatican, I felt a sense of reassurance and validation of my work and my source.

“As many have said to me, ‘it’s not every artist that has their work in the Vatican,’” Nichols added. “Sometimes a bit of imposter syndrome or the tendency to downplay it all creeps in. Yet despite it — or perhaps because of it — I find my voice gaining strength.”

Nichols also said she sees a link between her works appearing in the Vatican and in the office of a top federal official.

“The overlap of my work being in the spotlight of the both the former director of the FBI and Vatican has strengthened my notion that there is an interconnectedness with everything in the universe,” Nichols said. “Both the Vatican and FBI, imperfect in their efforts, fight the battle between good and evil and are pillars of morality. Lately, and especially after (the Jan. 6 events at the U.S. Capitol), I have felt that there truly is evil in the world and it is not to be taken lightly.”

“I felt that painting was an indulgence, something that I could never make a living from. This message was reinforced by many,” Nichols said. “Even so, after graduating (from college), I took a part-time job in an art supply store and enrolled in a watercolor class.”

She said after a year of living frugally as an artist and “feeling guilty for floundering and squandering my college education, I headed home to Connecticut.”

That was when Nichols, who had found a job as a graphic designer, met her soon-to-be husband and had three children.

She said she hoped that she could spend her time “pregnant and painting.”

“The first part panned out as I had three beautiful sons, but the painting part not so much,” Nichols recalled. “To make ends meet, I took a series of freelance jobs, juggling raising three children and deadlines.”

In 2000, with changes in her personal life, she quit a dependable full-time job and began to pursue her painting in earnest.

“I enrolled in an oil painting class and began driving 45 minutes to Meriden. The more I floundered, the more imperative painting became. Every Wednesday for 11 years, I organized my life around those painting classes. The nurturing environment served as a salve and support as I discovered myself and delved into oil painting,” Nichols said.

In 2013, with all three sons grown and living independently, she immersed herself in painting completely. She took out a student loan and enrolled in an MFA program, giving herself two years to paint and a chance to support herself as a professor.

Years of hard work followed, along with the success that has pushed her work to the national forefront.

“At times I feel like a conduit, that I’m downloading and transcribing,” Nichols said of her work. “I believe that the divine speaks through my painting. This sounds a little fantastical, so I try to put it in context and digestible thoughts – not just for others but for myself.

heart of Mother Mary and the 'dove' Sophia, wisdom and the Holy Spirit. This came unbidden. You should also know that I have not been a church goer for many years.”

And her creative process has become refined over the past two decades, she said.

“I stick to the idea that a painter paints. I don't paint every day; however, I make it a priority in my life,” Nichols said. “If I'm in a slump, I will make myself paint for at least 15 minutes, which may become five hours. It's easier to paint every day when I'm working on one of my large paintings – I can go in if even for a short time and make progress.”

Nature is intrinsic in her painting, so she finds a daily walk good practice in keeping it close, she said. A walk helps strengthen her painting vision and is a form of meditation.

“I often just 'see' a painting,” she said. “I don't know what draws me to a particular painting. It is more of a knowing, another intangible sense. A painting may incubate for years. There seems to be some divine timing at play.”

The last part of the process, she said, is sharing her work.

“I'm fortunate to have a support system of individuals that appreciate and collect my work,” Nichols said. “I've come to accept that I have a unique set of expressions that are not available upon demand. My paintings, in retrospect, may show a progression or pattern. Right now, with COVID-19, art viewing and sales seem to be shifting to online. I'm exploring ways to expand my exposure and connect my art with others.”

For Nichols, who offers online classes for aspiring artists as well as a [website and blog](#) detailing her inspirations, helping pass on the rich tradition of painting is something she loves.

“A living breathing entity, painting serves as a retreat, a form of meditation, a way to center and release emotions,” Nichols said. “It is a visual validation of time well spent leaving the artist with a sense of accomplishment and self-worth.

“Sharing painting with my students is extremely rewarding as I witness their transformation and growth ... as much as I may give, I get much more in return,” Nichols added. “I am inspired to learn and grow along with them.”