

Karen Vournakis explores plantation life with new collection

The Colorist

by Erica Jackson Curran [@calendar_girl](#)



Provided

Vournakis' still life-style photos capture the hard-working heart of local plantations like Middleton Place.

If you ask artist Karen Vournakis, the heart of a plantation is not the grand house where the wealthy owners once sipped tea and entertained guests. Rather it's the stables, the barns, and the sheds where laborers sweated it out to keep the plantation running smoothly. In her new series *Working Charleston Plantations*, Vournakis explores the quiet corners of Middleton Place, Boone Hall, and the Heyward Washington House.

"It's essentially an interest in these working venues, the artisan spaces that to me were very much the center of the plantation where a lot of the work was done — potters, weavers, blacksmiths," Vournakis says. "The space is really quite interesting, and the artifacts within these spaces ... they're critical to the success of the plantation."

Vournakis' subjects include a bed in a sun-dappled slave cabin with a colorful quilt folded neatly on the end. A deer hide dries against a brick wall, and a collection of tools rests on a shelf in a barrel-making studio at Middleton Place. Her photographs have a painterly, still-life quality that reflects her progression as a photographer.

Vournakis began her artistic career as a painter and printmaker in Boston, focusing on watercolors and woodcuts. She soon took an interest in photography as well, studying early photographic methods at MIT and then heading to Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts to get her master's degree in experimental studios. After earning her degree, she turned her full attention to photography.

It was the 1980s, well before the digital age, and color photographs didn't have the lifespan they do today. "Color, especially film, was very fleeting. It wasn't a stable process," she says. So she started exploring the old process of hand-painting her photographs, a popular practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It became a signature of her work.

"I've taken that tradition of the old hand-painting photograph and really pushed it into my own direction by layering oils and crayons and pencils to come up with a full color image on top of that black and white," she says. "So I'm able to choose my own color palette. It could be a warm palette or a cool palette. But it's still about the process. I'm still a printmaker in my mind."

The Lowcountry has served as a muse for Vournakis since she moved here in 1995. She ran the Karen Vournakis Studio/Gallery for eight years, and she's exhibited at various local galleries around town since then. Previous series have explored local gardens and the facade of St. Philip's Church.

Plantations, featuring all digital work, represents a new direction for Vournakis, yet it retains elements of her previous work. "It's still very painterly in its orientation," she says. "Though I'm not hand-coloring anymore, it's all about color and atmosphere. ... The camera to me is like a paintbrush. It's really the eye behind the camera that makes the difference."

Vournakis uses a digital SLR system, working in a raw format that allows for more precise control over the image quality. She does all the processing and printing in her downtown studio on a digital editing and pigment ink printing system, then prints on fine art paper. The photographs are mounted without glass in the frame, allowing viewers a closer look at the finished product.

Vournakis says she's likely to continue exploring local plantations until she's ready to move on to her next subject. "I tend to work in series," she says. "Whenever I become interested in a subject matter, I'll work on it for awhile until I kind of work it to death and have nothing more to say."

Tags: Atrium Art Gallery, Karen Vournakis