PHOTO PAINTING

Vournakis combines light and color

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The beaches are so beautiful here. They are so meditative, yet dynamic because they are always changing. Every time I visit the beach, the water has changed the sand and the entire landscape," says artist Karen Vournakis, whose delightful beach scenes, historical imagery and landscapes display a compelling sense of enchantment.

Vournakis' hand-painted photography and mixed-media art are created by coloring directly on her original black-and-white gelatin silver prints with a mixture of photo oils, colored pencils and specialty crayons. This combination of photography and painting exhibits her knowledge of light and color theory that is reflected in the final product by her ability to manipulate and emphasize certain areas of the photograph.

"I studied print-making and painting prior to becoming interested in photography. My art is a blend of all three areas of interest. The images I create are fine quality gelatin silver prints processed archivally in my studio. I've developed a unique technique of layering oil, aquamarine wax crayons and pencils directly on the print. Color is used as a special element within the images. By using color theory, I can create the illusion of objects receding or moving forward in space," explains Vournakis.

"To me, every photograph is the result of an interactive process of image construction between the artist, camera and the final print. In these images I work in the tradition of hand-painting on the photograph, which began in the mid-19th century as a means of rendering the subjects more lifelike," she says. Her imagery begins as a classical black-and-white photograph printed on fiber-based paper and is then used as the backdrop for her creativity. She transforms the photograph by using color to accentuate or play down certain areas of the picture and essentially creates an evocative atmosphere that exists largely in her imagination.

"My multimedia approach transforms the black/white print into full color. The color input is used to provide spatial elements within the image," says Vournakis. Her emotional work ranges in size from large 32-by-32-inch prints to smaller 8-by-10-inch images, and explores her passion for architecture, history and archaeology. Most of the photographs were taken in Charleston, Greece, Italy and the Middle East which confirms her interest in historical imagery by including ancient vessels, doorways, columns, landscapes, and ancient ruins.

Once she has captured the images that intrigue her, she then has the ability to use her memory and beliefs about the pictures to create her own atmosphere. "Transforming a black-and-white image to full color is an interpretive process. The color schemes are chosen according to mood and atmosphere within the photograph. The passage of time allows memory and emotion to enter into the interpretation. Color is a motif and strong aesthetic content in my work," she explains.

Vournakis' extensive education in the arts began at Albion College in Albion, Mich., where she received a B.A. in fine arts and continued her studies at Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts, where she received her masters of fine arts. Eventually, she began to teach photography at Syracuse University and continued to teach at Colgate University and Dartmouth College.

Her many years of participating in the arts has allowed her to create an internationally known presence, and her work has been included in many collections, including the Bibliothèque National, Paris; the Everson Museum, Syracuse, N.Y.; the Erie Museum, Erie, Pa.; the Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, Hamilton, N.Y.; private collections of Kidder Peabody and Co. Inc. in New York; Atlantic Mutual Co., Madison, N.J.; Fidelity Management and Research in Boston.