Merchant's Corner:

Gay Schempp's Studio at Whiting Mills

By BOB BAILEY
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WINSTED — Gay Schempp is an artist and educator with a studio located on the top floor at suite 414 in the Whiting Mills building on 210 Holabird Ave.

Schempp's studio is 600 square feet, and she opened it eight years ago.

"I'm an artist, not an encaustic artist or a watercolor artist," Schempp said. "The content of what I want to express drives the media. Say if I want to express what it feels like to be swimming in Highland Lake. Then I'll use oil paint to create. If I want to express the unique light of Santa Fe, I use pastel. What I want to say dictates if I use clay, oil, chalk, wax, plaster, watercolor, graphite or charcoal."

Schempp explains that for the last five years she has focused on using beeswax as a media. This is an ancient art used by the Greeks in Egypt, called encaustic painting.

She explained that for this type of art pigmented beeswax is fused onto a wooden panel in multiple layers which allows the telling of a complicated story, or as she calls it "A collage of images weaving into one story."

Schempp discovered her passion as an only child growing up in Stratford.

Her mother was in and out of the hospital and her father was a traveling salesman, leaving her at home alone to entertain herself.

Schempp's father had an artistic side and sold political cartoons to local newspapers.

"It was natural for me to start drawing in my free time," she said. "My father recognized my talent and encouraged me. I idolized him and emulated his passion."

Schempp continued her interest in art by attending the University of Bridgeport, starting out at first in industrial design, then transferring and graduating from the School of Fine Arts.

After school she attempted to make a living in New York City as a painter, but found the timing wasn't right so returned to the University of Bridgeport and obtained a degree in education.

"During this time each student had to do some kind of apprenticeship, and I was lucky to have found a potter and learned to absolutely love clay," Schempp said.

Continuing her new found direction, Schempp eventually became a master potter and made a living doing shows and workshops all over the United States for about twenty years.

In order to travel, Schempp put together a tour of American craftspersons, including potters and weavers, all masters in their chosen media.

The group travelled to Japan to meet and exchange knowledge with Japanese master craftsmen.

Schempp said that in Japan the nation supports their traditional craftspersons and refers to them as "living treasures."

"Artists are held in high esteem and are admired greatly," she said.

"The Japanese government vetted the artists I brought over. They are very serious about art as it's always been an esteemed part of their culture."

Soon Schempp added Greece and Italy to her artist tours and travelled the world as guide and teacher for nearly 20 years.

In the early 1990s tragedy struck Gay by way of a drunk driver on I-95, nearly killing her. The result was a broken neck, and the end of her ability to throw the large pots she was known for or continue that career.

After struggling for a period, Schempp attended a career change course at the University of Fairfield.

"After two weeks they determined I should be a steam boat captain!" Schempp said.

Instead Schempp returned to the Rhode Island School of Design and obtained a masters degree in fine art and art education.

After graduating, Schempp was hired as an art teacher for New Canaan High school, where in 2000 she was awarded Outstanding Art Educator of the year by the state.

In 2006 Gay retired and moved to Winsted, where her husband Glen was a resident.

"Almost immediately I found Whiting Mills and fell in love with the high ceilings and huge windows," Schempp said. "With a management that is constantly improving the environment, it's the perfect place for an artist to create and flourish."

The accolades and awards Schempp has accumulated over the years are too many to mention, as are the galleries and collections in which her pieces hang. But with a smile Schempp shares that she does have a piece hanging in the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Presently Schempp is holding private and group lessons and workshops teaching painting, drawing, collage or encaustics. She books classes as people call her. Individual creative expression combined with the confident handling of technique is the goal.

For more information call Schempp at her studio at 860-379-1592 or go to her website at www.gayschempp.com.