

# Boston Globe: Beauty, with unconventional vision

By Denise Taylor, Globe Correspondent / June 11, 2009



"Autumn Window" by Janice Schupak Frishkopf, who is legally blind and bases her drawings on the world as she sees it.

When she has the time, Janice Schupak Frishkopf sits at her drafting table on her sun porch in Belmont surrounded by what she calls "a big mess." But her focus is elsewhere. The 62-year-old leans in close to peer at the 9-by-12-inch sheet of paper before her. Then she begins to draw and decipher the world as she sees it. Legally blind but with some vision, her view is not like most others - nor is her artwork, or her attitude.

"My work is flat because I don't have 3D vision; I see only in 2D. And what hits me first when I see things are mainly patterns and colors, not depth. That's why my drawings look more primitive," she said. "And it doesn't matter if people like it or not. This is just how I work."

But more and more people do like Schupak Frishkopf's artwork. After decades of anonymity, she is finding that interest in her as an outsider artist is mounting. Last year, the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown featured Schupak Frishkopf's vibrant, patterned pencil and ink drawings in a group show of folk art. Now she is a permanent featured artist in the gallery's "Artique" space.

"She's a genuine sleeper," said Berta Walker, who owns the gallery. "She's been coming into my gallery for years and last year mentioned she did art herself, and, well, I've heard that a million times. But I asked her for a few jpegs of her work, and I was absolutely amazed."

Schupak Frishkopf's style merges the abstract world she sees with a raw, expressive folk-art sensibility. She sees shapes but few details. If she gets very close, she sees textures - and she is a connoisseur of textures. But for her, flowers float stemless in feathery green space. Trees are spheres or patchworks of color. Landscapes reduce to a color-rich geometry. So she draws them this way - art conventions be damned.

"The work is not just enchanting, it is magical," said Walker. "Her pattern-making, the sense of the interaction of the shapes, you think of M.C. Escher. It's not just the talent in the hand and the eye, it's another form of mind play that she's able to do."

Schupak Frishkopf borrows from her background as a professional pianist. "I try to get movements in the colors," she said. "I'm a musician, and when I draw, there has to be some kind of lyricism, some kind of melody, and something that gives me an emotional feeling."

Schupak Frishkopf has never had an art lesson. She honed her craft in the 1970s using Flair pens, and didn't move on to traditional materials until discovering inks in 1980.

"I ask for advice now and then, but I'm drawing totally for myself," she said. "I'm not trying to please an instructor, or anyone else." You could even say a box of 120 colored pencils purchased in 1991 became her greatest mentor. They were her first artist's pencils and she is still using the same set today.

"Those pencils changed everything. My designs got better. Although I'd been doing this my whole life, all of a sudden there was growth," she said. "I could mix colors. I could layer colors. I could get the intensity I wanted, and I love cutting the ink through the colored pencil. To me, it gives the work a quality of being 3D. My work is flat, but moving from pencil to ink adds a different texture."

In the late '90s, Schupak Frishkopf began to timidly share her drawings with others. The response was positive. Occasionally, she entered and won art competitions. Acquaintances began snapping up her work. An interior designer kept her on call for commissions. The Enfield Shaker Museum in New Hampshire commissioned a set of note cards. A two-time breast cancer survivor, she donated a work titled "Healing Wreath" to the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center that continues to comfort patients today.

But still, Schupak Frishkopf viewed her work as a private hobby. "I've been playing piano since I was 3, so that's what people know me as, not an artist," she said. "And I'm visually impaired. So I never thought about art as something I could do in a serious way."

It took a solo show at the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Habitat Gallery in Belmont in 2005 to change her perspective.

"That's when I realized that I had taken a step forward. I had never seen all my work in one room. That was a turning point," she said. "That's when I decided to take myself more seriously."

Schupak Frishkopf retired from teaching piano last fall. With more time to draw, she's hoping to start a note-card business and perhaps display her work more.

A solo show of her art, "Rhythm and Tone: Drawings from Nature," is on display at Belmont's Kitchen on Common until the middle of next month.