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VISUAL ARTS

Artist & Entrepreneur

Ella Walton Richardson brings international art to Charleston's doorstep

BY NICK SMITH

When Ella Walton Richardson takes a photograph, she carefully aims at the subject, focuses and captures a stunning moment. But her determined sense of purpose isn't confined to photography. She also owns a downtown gallery that celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. It has grown from a modest venture to a grand space, thanks to Richardson's resolve.

The Columbia, South Carolina, native never thought she'd end up in the art world. "I'm not a painter," she says in a mellow Southern accent, "but I have a great eye." As a child with low esteem, she didn't consider herself artistic. Yet when she matured, she followed diverse paths that inform her work today. "I did modeling," she says. "I helped people do interior design, sold real estate and ran several small hotels and B & B inns." While

she cultivated her business credentials, she also yearned to stretch her creative side. Running a gallery was the perfect choice.

In 1997, Richardson says she was asked to run renowned American Impressionist John Carroll Doyle's gallery. Over a four-year period, she estimates that she helped to quadruple the price of Doyle's work as well as his sales of original art. This was partly thanks to her grasp of Charleston's art market. At the same time, she realized that there was room for international art far removed from traditional Lowcountry subjects. The city needed a gallery that sold wide-ranging art that catered to art collectors from around the world.

In 2001 Richardson took a California vacation and met five artists who would show in her gallery. Initially, she thought it would take three to five years before she could set up shop. Instead, within two weeks of returning to Charleston, the funding became available. She was able to obtain the work of 12 artists to open a space on Broad Street. The only thing she did not plan for was September 11.

"The whole world seemed to have gone crazy. I questioned if I should move forward with my dream," says Richardson, a spiritual woman who does missionary work in Burundi,



Photograph by Rick Rhodes

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Simon Balyon, *Broad Street*

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Lindsay Goodwin, *Château de Colbert, Val de Loire*

Africa. “A lot of people said, ‘Oh, you’re an idiot’ for wanting to do it,” she recalls. “But God had made everything fall into place and now I just need to keep the faith and do the leg work.” These days she still designs the gallery’s ads, does the bookkeeping, hangs art and gives the space a personal touch that other galleries lack.

“Ella does not back down from any challenge,” says John Doyle, whose career as a painter and photographer continues to ascend. “She’s a hard-working business-woman.” Although a lot of galleries fail, he

adds, “She’s done very well for herself. She’s brought some painters that maybe would not have been here.” These include Holland native Hennie de Korte with his impressive use of striking colors; fellow Dutchman Johannes Eerdmans, who paints meticulous still lifes; and Californian Lindsay Goodwin, known for her sumptuous interiors.

Along with a predominance of oil paintings, there are acrylics, unique Amy Lenzi jewelry, bronze sculptures, plus photographs by the owner.

Richardson’s vividly captured subjects—

including lions, zebras and other African wildlife—are a rare breed. “I don’t have much time to take photographs except when I travel,” she says. “If all I had to do was photography that would be awesome.”

Doyle feels that she has the chops. “Not many people know this, but she’s very accomplished,” he says. “If she had to, she could make a living doing it. Not every photographer can say that.”

While the gallery remains Richardson’s first love, she would like to have an annual exhibition of her works in the future. In the meantime, shows featuring American landscape painter J. Christian Snedeker and Dutch artist Simon Balyon will draw viewers into her elegant, inviting space. ➤

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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