

A sentimental journey



Bill Hoban/Index-Tribune

LIA TRANSUE'S surreal collection of paintings, "Can't Take It With You," is on display this weekend at Alley Gallery at 148 E. Napa St.

Lia Transue's surreal collection on display

By Carole Kelleher
Special to the Index-Tribune

Flying through clouds as her husband pilots a small plane and swirling through the confounding reality of her late mother-in-law's hoarding were the inspirations that found Lia Bonagura-Transue putting to paint a surreal collection called "Can't Take It With You."

The intriguing paintings depict such images as a red, remote-controlled toy car zooming through the sky and a brown box full of Hallmark collectible Christmas ornaments being emptied into oblivion, all almost life-sized in oil on 36-by-48-inch canvases.

Lia began painting these images last year, just as Blaine was learning to fly a plane and his mother was struggling with a terminal illness.

When her husband traveled to the Midwest to comfort his mother, and, following her passing, to deal with dispersing with four houses, multiple storage sheds and a mobile home full of "collections," Lia was at her studio in Sonoma grappling with the situation.

"I had no intention when I started other than to deal with these feelings I had and finding a way to express them. My husband was dealing with all this and I felt like there wasn't anything I could do," Lia said.

So she painted Lazy Boy chairs, which her mother-in-law had many, many of, and let them float around in a blue sky. Another canvas shows pianos blowing through storm clouds, created while Blaine was trying to figure out what to do with eight pianos, deciding to keep one, and giving the player piano in perfect condition to a retirement community.

"This is not about consumption, this is more of a sentimental journey," Lia said, explaining that she sees the doll that appears in two of the 12 paintings as representing a sense of understanding.

"The doll symbolizes a sense of knowing. She understands the hoarding," Lia said.

It seemed everyone in town turned out last Friday evening for the opening reception at the Alley Gallery, as Lia is well-known Sonoma artist loved by many. She was the art director at the Sonoma Community Center in the late 1990s and was the executive director of the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art from 2000 to 2009, before deciding to step down and return to painting full-time.

"It took me a long time after I left the museum to get quiet inside my head again," the tall, brown-eyed artist with the striking gray hair said. She now paints everyday, sometimes for just two hours, and other times as long as eight. A native of New York,

she attended the famous High School of Music and Art, moving to study at the California Institute of the Arts and finishing her training at the Academy of Art in San Francisco.

She and Blaine moved to Sonoma to raise a family in 1989, leaving the city for life in the country after the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

"I really feel fortunate that I'm able to come back and paint again," she said of her life of the last few years. This experience of painting from the reality of her life is something new. She describes her mother-in-law as a beautiful, accomplished woman an impressive career, but who struggles with a "collecting" disorder. It caused Lia both anxiety and humor for years, and she said in statement about the show, "a tremendous amount of sarcasm and absolute disbelief."

Her paintings reflect her trying to understand the collecting, and the huge sky backgrounds come from plane rides with Blaine. "It changed my life when I went through a cloud," she said. "It was a very spiritual feeling. Very special. I can't explain it."

Her paintings explain it for her.

"Can't Take It With You" will be shown through July 27 at the Alley Gallery at 148 E. Napa St., from noon to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

To see the work online, visit lia-art.com.