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Artist Suzanne Peterson, an island native, is surrounded by a few of her watercolors from her current show, "Figure Studies," at Galveston Outfitters, 2425 The Strand.

## Island artists see the light

**By Laura Elder**  
 The Daily News

Published June 27, 2010

No one would have blamed island artists for feeling betrayed.

The Gulf of Mexico, muse to so many, turned on them during Hurricane Ike. Surge from the September 2008 storm climbed walls in homes, studios and galleries, swallowing paintings, photographs, sculptures — so much inspired by life near the sea. The cultural loss was incalculable, the irony brutal.

But despite that loss, artists, gallery owners and patrons are helping to fuel the recovery of downtown and attracting visitors from all over.

In the 21 months since Ike, an art revival has spread through the historic downtown. Works by local and regional artists can be found in cigar shops, the lobbies of luxury lofts and even in eye care centers. Galleries that opened after Ike include Bogan Gallery, J. Bangle Silk Stocking (J. Bangle also has a West End gallery) René Wiley Studio Gallery and PeckArts. The newcomers joined established Buchanan Gallery, DesignWorks and Wagner Sousa Modern Art, which, despite sustaining severe flood damage, chose to return.

But what's driving the bustling art scene? Artists say the island's allure is greater than the risk. They come for the soft, clean light, birds in flight, the sunsets, the old architecture, itself grounded in artistic expression, the historic houses, the odd characters and the grittier aesthetic of the old port town.

Gallery owners say inexpensive rent compared with other cities is inspiring more spaces to showcase works, and collectors say they find surprisingly high quality art for a town this small and so far off the usual fine arts trade routes.

Less than a year after Ike, artist René Wiley opened a gallery and studio at

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2128 Postoffice St., next to Mod Coffeehouse. Wiley's work already had a following among locals and around the world. Her "Galveston Alleyways" series was displayed at gallery DesignWorks, 2119 Postoffice St.

Wiley said she long has been attracted by the island's endless supply of subject matter, be it humble pathways or harbor scenes. Her most recent collection, "Sacred Spaces," depicts old churches.

Wiley always awakens ahead of the sunrise, seeking to capture what she describes as the rosy pink glow in the atmosphere, she said. The Gulf Coast sky provides a light like no other, she said.

Wiley, her fishing guide husband, Ben, and their three daughters, moved to the island from Conroe seven years ago. Storm surge flooded the family's East End house and destroyed years of Wiley's work. Despite the loss, Wiley, like other artists, saw beauty in Ike's chaos. She painted grounded boats and battered buildings.

She long had wanted to open her own gallery. But doing so in the early months of recovery was risky, she concedes. No one knew how quickly the island would rebound. But although art wasn't necessary to the city's survival, it was essential to the recovery of its spirit, she said.

"A door opened; a crack was made," Wiley said. "Let's just go through it and see what happens on the other side."

The island always has been Suzanne Peterson's source of inspiration. An island native, she has traveled far from her hometown, even studying early Renaissance painters in Rome.

Peterson, who teaches at Alvin Community College, has returned to the island, living her dream of owning a historic house.

Her work, like the island, is a study in dichotomies. She paints leggy women wearing shades, stilettos and too much lipstick, while also offering up ephemeral scenes of the Virgin Mary, a strong influence from her Catholic upbringing.

No matter where she is or what she paints, the island's "contrasts — the grace, charm and seedy quirkiness of the place" — influence her work, Peterson said.

"I don't always paint Galveston scenes, but there is always something about Galveston in everything I paint," she said.

"There is a Galveston nonchalance, an attitude, a sense of humor all stirred together making a distinctive cultural gumbo here."

Patrons also are inspired by the island, said Peterson, who is showing work at Galveston Outfitters, 2425 The Strand. Visitors see the art as a meaningful memento, a way to take a piece of the island home, she said.

Jennifer Peck understands that well. Peck, who often can be seen painting in her small studio at the Urban Lofts, 2208 Postoffice St., uses bright colors and whimsy to tell stories about life at the beach.

Her beaches, birds, flowers, big yellow suns, surf boards, quirky beach houses on stilts and martini glasses all are big sellers to second homeowners and interior designers working in condominiums as far away as Miami.

Peck also exhibits work of other artists, including Russel Mai, who often paints bold skies.

Mai has said: "Living on the coast is necessary. There's something about this environment that feeds my soul."

Peck has spent 20 years in the art business, operating galleries in San Francisco and Austin.

Though a much smaller city, the island has an abundance of artists who create a tight-knit scene, inspiring and supporting each other, she said.

"There's a lot of camaraderie," she said. "I notice it especially on Postoffice Street."

Photographer and art historian Susan Bogan opened her gallery at 2217 Postoffice St. a year ago. While emerging artists find the island welcoming, Bogan is impressed by the strong selection of good art.

"There's a quality here people may not expect," Bogan said.

Not all work is inspired by coastal scenes.

Bogan exhibits established and nationally regarded artists, including James Busby, Joyce Howell, Isabelle Dupuy and "Butch" Skyneer, who moved to the island in 1997 for his wife's health. Skyneer, who works in various media, including acrylic and metal, lost studios, equipment and a large part of his remaining work to Ike.

One piece, "What Ike Left," is for sale at Bogan's gallery. The abstract piece had been salvaged by a friend. Skyneer reclaimed it, sanded it, scraped it and bleached it.

The nonprofit Galveston Arts Center, which had showcased visual arts at its permanent space at 2127 The Strand since 1968, lost \$140,000 worth of art to storm surge. The center, which is temporarily at 2501 Market St., is rebuilding. It also continues to organize ArtWalk, which every six weeks draws hundreds of residents and visitors to galleries, nonprofit spaces and other walls in the island's historic district.

"Galveston has a very active visual arts community for the size we are," Alexandra Irvine, executive director of the center, said.

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