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## 'Curious' collection: Springfield artist goes own way in UIS exhibit

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One week before she is to open a solo exhibition at the University of Illinois Springfield, **Felicia Olin** is sitting in the living room of her Springfield home, surrounded by her work.

Some paintings are stacked against the fireplace mantel. Others are lined up beneath the television in the corner. More are on the landing of the stairs.

Almost all of them were created in the last six months specifically for this show.

That includes the new painting "The Amazon," based on her earlier "Amazons." (The original won Best in Show at the 2009 Illinois State Fair professional art competition.)

Like most of her paintings, it depicts a lithe, fair-skinned woman in a natural setting. She is wearing a sheer garment draped off her shoulders, exposing her chest.

Unlike most of Olin's other paintings, however, this woman has a mastectomy scar where her right breast once was.

"I realized I shouldn't have sold it," Olin said of the original as she picked up the successor and placed it on an easel. "I wanted to make one that was an updated version and a little bigger and a little different, so I've redone it for this show. I thought she should be at the show."

Olin said it's loosely based on the mother of a friend, who had a rose tattooed over her own mastectomy scar.

"It's a collection of little bits and pieces from other photos, like surgical photos, and I've used several different faces to build the face," Olin said.

Another painting, "Most Envious," shows a woman with mint-green skin seated on a purple couch. Of course, as with much of Olin's work, text descriptions only scratch the surface of what's going on.

In an e-mail, Olin said she got the idea for the painting when she was parking her car on the way to her job (she's a framer at Jeffrey Alans).

"I saw this faint and fleeting image in my head for literally half a second. I found a piece of paper and a pen and jotted it down and went home and recreated what I had seen as much as I could remember it," Olin wrote.

Liz Murphy Thomas, the director of the visual arts gallery and an assistant professor of art and digital media at UIS, said she tries to program a diverse array of exhibits each academic year at the gallery. That diversity includes local and national artists and both two- and three-dimensional work.

But those local artists are often faculty at UIS or Lincoln Land Community College or another area school. It's been several years since an independent local artist such as Olin has had a solo show at the UIS gallery.

"I picked Felicia because I really, really like her work. I'm really impressed by it," Murphy Thomas said.

"She really needs to be distributed. She really could promote herself and be distributed and be successful in distributing art beyond just what's specific to Springfield."

Free to be herself

Olin, a 1995 graduate of Springfield High School, frequently shows her work in the Prairie Art Alliance's gallery in the Hoogland Center for the Arts. On a recent weekday afternoon, only a handful of the scores of artworks on display had the red-dot stickers indicating they had been sold, but two of those were paintings by Olin. Her works often seem to sell when many others do not.

"You know the second you see it, it's a Felicia. You know it's hers," Murphy Thomas said. "I see a lot of promise in her. So even though she's outside of the norm, I thought that maybe this could be a good experience for her as well as us."

The exhibits are put together in different ways depending on the show. For political cartoonist Ted Rall, Murphy Thomas said she personally looked at every cartoon he had drawn over 17 years and asked him to submit certain drawings.

"It was a really interesting process, because I started to get so emotional from all of the wars (and) Iraq," she said.

For this show, Olin has discretion to choose the painting she wants to exhibit. She set out to create an entirely new body of work for the show, which is only her second after a solo show last year at Robert Morris Gallery.

"There are only two or three I might reuse from last time," Olin said. "So I made all this in six months, which is stressful, but I like doing it."

Olin said she felt freer to be herself in the UIS show. There are pieces she plans to exhibit that she wouldn't even try to show at the Prairie Art Alliance.

Those include works in a series she called "uterus with bird."

One painting shows a naked woman's hips and thighs. The body is cross-sectioned where low-rise jeans might rest — like a plastic doll pulled apart at the middle — with an opening filled with pomegranate and grapes and white and red flowers. A red bird perches on each side, the spot where someone might put her hands on her hips.

"I didn't really plan it, but the birds kind of look territorial, and that worked well with the theme of fertility," Olin said.

"I could have people saying, 'Who'd hang that in their house?' But I didn't do it for people to hang in their house," she said. "I had done a piece called 'Infertility,' and I've recently had friends who've had children, so I thought it was time I did a fertility piece."

As she talks, she begins clicking and repeatedly turning over a pen that had been lying next to the canisters of paintbrushes on the coffee table.

The walls in the living room are painted green, with a cloudlike texture. But few of Olin's paintings have earned a permanent place in the house.

One, "Love and Poetry #1," Olin said she keeps because it's her husband's favorite. Most, however, are sent on once she has finished them.

"I don't really hang a lot of my stuff because I don't need to keep it," Olin said. "But that one I might put in some different shows around the country."

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### Virtual docent

The UIS Visual Arts Gallery has been experimenting with a variety of social media — a Web site, Facebook and Twitter — to expand its reach in the community.

"Everyday that a show is running, we'll try to tweet some kind of interesting fact or trivia element about either a piece or about the artist themselves to enrich the experience of viewing that work," gallery director Liz Murphy Thomas said.

Recent tweets include:

- "This is the first exhibit that Khara Koffel is using the sense of smell in a sculpture."
- "Sergei Chepik's 3 favorite themes are landscape, religion, and bullfighting ..."
- "Did you know the print in the show 'Child in a Winter Hat' is actually a portrait of Arthur Danto's daughter, Lizzie?"

Murphy Thomas: "So that's something that doesn't replace the experience of seeing it, (but) maybe makes people curious to come in or gives you something a little bit extra to take away with you, from having seen the work."

To join the fun:

- [www.twitter.com/UIS\\_art\\_gallery](http://www.twitter.com/UIS_art_gallery)
- [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=53534828589](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=53534828589)
- [www.uis.edu/visualarts/gallery.html](http://www.uis.edu/visualarts/gallery.html)

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