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ECCENTRIC ARTISTE Gifted Birmingham painter Barbara Evans has a decidedly unique slant on life

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For a peek into Barbara Evans' psyche, all you have to do is examine those eyeglasses.

They're made of black plastic and slide low on her nose to give her an almost professorial air. Look closer, though, at the shape of each lens. The right one is square, the left one round.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is Evans in a nutshell: A myopic Southerner who wears her eccentricities well.

In case you've never heard of her, which is entirely possible, Evans is among Birmingham's most enduring working artists, whose paintings hang in homes across the city, the state, the region and beyond. "She is one of the top-collected artists in the South," says Michael Bradley, manager of Homewood's Little House on Linden gallery, which has sold Evans' work for 48 years.

Her paintings, like their creator, are eclectic - abstracts, landscapes, still lifes, Impressionists and, in recent years, studies of the 1920s Paris night, with emphasis on portraiture.

"The first painting I sold was at the sidewalk art show in Linn Park, a large abstract," Evans recalls. "Old Mrs. Ireland (a Birmingham society matron) bought one, and then her friends wanted one, and that's how it all got started."

This world traveler is inspired by the places she visits - Tuscany and Portofino, Italy; London and the English countryside; coastal Maine, which last year spawned scenes of boats in picturesque harbor towns; and Scottsdale, Ariz., where she studies each summer with renowned Japanese-American painter Milt Kobayashi.

"Not bad for a redneck from Florala," Evans, 71, says as her beloved dog, Margaret, nuzzles in her lap.

Evans spent her formative years in that tiny Alabama town on the Florida border, best known for its 1980s "voodoo mayor," who made international news when he sprinkled flour around City Hall in an effort to scare the police chief out of office.

"I was in France the summer that happened," Evans says. "I told everybody Florala was my hometown."

She actually was born in Anniston, to Barbara Harris, a schoolteacher, and Harris' bon vivant husband, Carl Stewart. "He never worked," Evans says. "He played golf. He loved to dance. He hunted a lot. He fished. He drank. He just never worked.

"But he had the right clothes for every activity."

Young Barbara was so skinny "they thought she had worms," her brother, Carl Stewart Jr., says. He, too, rose from small-town Alabama to enter the fine arts - as a stage actor in New York and Los Angeles, and, back in

Birmingham in the 1970s, as a founder of Birmingham Festival Theatre. In 1986, he started Terrific New Theatre and remains its artistic director.

"Did I remember to wear my teeth?" Stewart asks as he poses with Evans for a picture to go with this story.

She already had handed me a copy of a recent magazine story on Eudora Welty, written by Welty's friend and fellow writer Reynolds Price. "This is such a sweet article about Eudora, and I want you to take out Eudora's name and insert mine," Evans said. "You can substitute your name for Reynolds Price."

A gift of humor

Evans and her brother, who is six years younger, could have been stand-up comics. Stewart arrives at her Irondale house in an outfit that suggests a Vaudevillian lumberjack, topped by a porkpie hat. Both Stewart and Evans collect peculiar items. Her living room shelves are lined with 1920s-era bobble doll ashtrays, pink flamingos and a half-dozen elks' feet.

Both love Victorian-era taxidermy. Evans' dining room is decorated with stuffed birds and a rabbit. "Carl's got a weasel I want so bad," she says.

As children, Barbara drew pictures and played the violin, and Carl put on puppet shows and took tap dancing lessons. Their parents' troubled marriage kept going until one day Barbara's mother overheard her playing house with another little girl. "Mother said she heard the other girl say, 'You be the daddy and go to work.' And then she heard me say, 'Daddies don't go to work. They go fishing.'"

After their parents divorced, their mother married a pharmacist who moved the family to Florala. The children divided their summers between their mother's mother, Little Mother, in Goodwater, and their father's mother in Munford.

Their uncle ran a Goodwater casket factory, and Little Mother used the satin casket lining material to sew gowns for the granddaughters, aunts, female cousins and Carl.

Both grandmothers lived next to cemeteries, playgrounds for Barbara

and Carl. Their Munford grandmother, Minnie, was a college graduate who thought nothing of jumping in her car, with husband, Oliver, at the wheel, to make a quick visit to, say, the Grand Canyon.

By her teens, Barbara began to win accolades with her paintings and drawings. "I remember her drawing a picture with the old Dutch Cleanser woman in it," Carl says. "She won the prize at the fair and hasn't been right since."

A tinge of modesty

Although she considered herself a homely girl, Barbara was a cheerleader at Florala's Covington County High School and dated a football player named Dick Evans. They continued to date in college, as Barbara studied art at Huntington College in Montgomery and got involved in the civil rights movement. She attended meetings supporting the Montgomery bus boycott and marched in civil rights demonstrations.

For all her freewheeling ways, Barbara was also a traditionalist who left college to marry her high school sweetheart. They settled in Birmingham, where Dick Evans still works as a CPA, and had three children.

By then she was selling her work at Little House, whose owner hired babysitters to take care of the kids while Barbara painted. The Evanses had a big house in Redmont Park, where they threw lavish parties. Barbara's studio was in the servant's house out back.

The marriage ended just as Barbara scored a huge success with her onewoman show at the Birmingham Museum of Art. Her work earned enough to allow her, after her children were older, to spend weeks in Europe preparing for shows titled "Barbara Evans in England," "Barbara Evans in Tuscany," and so on.

She began to sell her work outside of Birmingham, including at a gallery in tony Palm Beach, Fla. She also became a regular on the bohemian 1970s party circuit that included Birmingham's A-list artists, performers and writers.

"Finally, I got tired of going out," Evans says.

Through it all, she never stopped painting. "I admire her work ethic," her brother says. "That is, if you believe everything she tells you."

According to Bradley, the gallery manager, "She definitely is a professional. She gets up every morning and paints. She's very dedicated. And she enjoys it."

Her artwork continues to run the gamut. A few weeks ago she was working on a series of small European landscapes. Last week, she was tackling several large abstracts lined up in her home studio.

Evans lives a quiet life. She and Stewart have two half-brothers, Bob Stewart, executive director of the Alabama Humanities Foundation; and Wheeler Stewart, a golf pro in Florida. She has two grandchildren - 12-year-old Chloe and Truman, almost 8 - courtesy of her son, Charles Richard Evans, who works at Regions Bank, and his wife, Terry, a lawyer.

Her older daughter, Alison, died five years ago of cancer. (Barbara had a bout with the disease 23 years ago.) Her younger daughter, Amy Bergal, who works in horticulture, shares her mother's home. No longer a night life scenester, Evans rises before dawn to paint.

"My mother puts on her nightgown at 4 in the afternoon, locks the doors and gets in bed with Margaret," Bergal says.

Evans laughs. "To tell you the truth," she says, "All I really need is a muumuu and a trailer."

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