

Picture This: Now Houses Too Sit for Portraits

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

DURING the late 1980's, while traveling through England with her husband, Susan Stillman started painting houses. That is, she started painting pictures of houses.

"Painting the houses was originally something that just came to me," said Ms. Stillman, a White Plains-based artist, who was then earning her living illustrating books and newspapers. "I'd always gone in phases in my work. I painted a lot of landscapes for a while. And there was a time when I just did food."

But 15 years later, Ms. Stillman is still painting houses, and the pictures have moved far beyond the sphere of her personal work. The home portraits, as she calls them, have become a thriving business.

She now takes dozens of commissions each year, from Westchester and beyond, for customized acrylic portraits of private homes. She is possibly the only home portraitist in the area, working in a niche market that is largely her own creation.

The portraits usually take two or three months to complete, she said, and prices range from \$3,000 to \$6,000, depending on size. (More information is available at www.ahomeportraits.com.)

Ms. Stillman paints in an attic studio at her home. She divides her time among her teaching (she is a drawing teacher at the Parsons School of Design), her personal work (she often has shows at the Lois Richards gallery in Greenwich) and the home portraits.

Often, Ms. Stillman said, the portraits are commissioned as gifts for birthdays or anniversaries. Sometimes a family moving away from the area will commission a painting to help them remember a particularly well-loved home.

Once she receives a commission for a home portrait, Ms. Stillman visits the house that is to be painted and takes photographs of the property at different times of day. Then she begins a series of conversations with clients, during which they determine the house's most attractive angle, discuss the way the garden should look, and talk about details which, in the finished painting, will make the house look and feel like theirs.

"Susan is a dream to work with," said Stacy Scheinberg, who, with her husband, Ron, commissioned a painting of the family's country home, a converted dairy farm in Stormville. "We live in Manhattan, but the farm is where we feel our quality family time is. We love having the painting, so we can see the farm while we're in the city, and we really enjoyed the process. It was a wonderful experience, seeing the house through her eyes."

Ms. Stillman took some artistic liberties that wouldn't be possible in a photograph, Ms. Scheinberg said. She painted peonies and lilacs and clematis, all blooming at the same time. And there are a stand of birch trees and a little flower house that she



Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

Susan Stillman in her White Plains home, surrounded by her canvases of portraits of people's homes. After talking to a client, she adds details to put a house in its most attractive light.

moved a bit so they would be on the canvas.

Ms. Stillman is no stickler for staying true to life. Her clients commission her work for sentimental reasons, and she is happy to help them create idealized visions of their homes. Whatever is most beautiful is Ms. Stillman's rule, and painting gardens full of flowers that could not, in nature, bloom during the same season is just one of her painterly tricks.

Once, several years ago, a client asked Ms. Stillman if she could paint a home portrait taking the house back in time.

"She asked me to paint the home as it had looked when she and her parents were

young," Ms. Stillman said. "She got the neighbors to tell her what the plantings were, and she gave me old photos which showed how the landscaping had looked. I even painted a dog that she had had when she was a child."

The client, Mona Conner, planned the painting as a gift for her parents, who were then thinking about selling their house near Mechanicsburg, Pa., after living there 44 years. The house had once stood alone, surrounded by open country, but after a spate of development in the area, it was now flanked by other houses. Ms. Conner decided that the painting would be a sort of pictorial

survey of the house over the years, comprising her parents' favorite memories.

"I went over with Susan all the things we'd loved about the house," Ms. Conner recalled.

Aided by old photographs, and with directions from Ms. Conner and her siblings, Ms. Stillman painted a horse farm — now long gone — to the right of the house. Tied up by the side of the house is a dog — also long gone — with a dead groundhog in its mouth, which represents a favorite family legend.

She also painted a little garden that represents the house as it is now, and a red swing that represents the grandchildren.

With her bright, sharply detailed paintings of buildings, Ms. Stillman's home portraits often recall the work of Edward Hopper. Yet where Hopper painted isolation, Ms. Stillman's sense of life and warmth in her work draws raves from clients.

"I am very influenced by Hopper, but I don't have his temperament," Ms. Stillman said. "I'll throw the house into a happy light with some sunshine, maybe play up the violets in the asphalt. A home portrait is an intuitive collaboration. When someone commissions me, I'm trying to see the house through their eyes, but to paint it with an artist's eyes."