

ROBERTA HARRIS:
Feeling Life with a Capital 'L'
by Richard Varr

Chaotic expression drifts into harmony and peace. Discordant black and white squares slowly blossom into geometric patterns tinted with muted ochre and pinks, emblazoned with soft-petal roses and gentle green leaves. And, according to the artist who created this collage-painting, it's an artwork that contrasts the turmoil and inner solitude – through a churning range of emotions – that women face daily.

"I think the image is quite feminine. It's all about renewal and rebirth, the challenges and the chaos, and the organization we as women have to deal with in our lives every day," says Houston artist Roberta Harris, whose artwork, "Explicit Transition," graces the cover of this inaugural issue of the Houston Woman Business Directory. "When I think about women working, that's what our lives are about – explicit transition."

Harris, a contemporary artist with a resume that spans more than 30 years, is sitting in her white-walled Montrose studio amidst tables crammed with buckets of bushy paint brushes and sharp-edged pallet knives. On another table, a few hundred tubes of both oil and acrylic paint – most encrusted with the dried residue of vibrant colors – are heaped in boxes and strewn on the table. On the walls encircling her studio are many paintings with her consistent images – collages of squares, birds and flowers embedded in canvases awash in such hues as ultra marine and cobalt blues, or sun-soaked ocean turquoise and green.

Harris says her images portray themes of chaos, inspiration and peace. A closer look at "Explicit Transition" reveals just that. Between the chaotic black and white on the painting's left side and the soft-colored and flowered right side, sits a string of circles cutting diagonally through the painting – another aspect that leads to her interpretation of inspiration.

"All the circles are about movement, certainly about design and color and joy bubbling up. Circles are like wheels that move you into another place," she points out.

"I see it as a chaotic side, and then it transitions into peaceful images. Flowers are nature, and I see them as peaceful," she says. "The painting is feminine, masculine and feminine, expressing renewal, movement, joy and life with a capital 'L.'"

This artist's work has been displayed in close to 30 one-person exhibitions, and will include one such event at the Women's Museum in Dallas, an affiliate of the Smithsonian, from July through September 2009. The exhibition, called "UP," will feature approximately 150 pieces of her artwork, including paintings, sculpture and works on paper.

Her paintings and sculptures have been exhibited nationally and internationally and her work has been included in exhibitions in the Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Many of her exhibitions have been in Houston, Dallas and Santa Fe, New Mexico, including selected group exhibitions where several of her works had been on display. Her work is also included in many corporate and private collections.

Harris also works on commissions, some of which reach beyond just paint on canvas. Her latest project is creating a design for the fuselage and tail of a small aircraft that lands on water, a design she's drawing with her recurring themes – this time bird tail feathers and geometric forms.

"I love the challenge, because whenever I'm challenged, it makes me think and allows me to be more creative," she says.

Referring back to her artwork "Explicit Transition," she again relates it to women's perceptions of reality.

"I feel that it's a positive painting. It's not depressing," she asserts. "I feel that given the fact that women's lives are chaotic, and that we have to be renewing and rebirthing, there's the positive outcome here."

A closer look at the figures embedded within the canvases of her other artworks, from fish and birds to flowers, moons and hearts, Harris says she uses forms that are universal – things that can be identified anywhere in the world. "The patterns are old and used and remade into something new. A lot of what I'm using here is old wallpaper and old patterns," Harris says. "A lot of women may look at this and say, 'my mother had that in her bathroom or dining room.' But I've recreated it into a new pattern and made something totally new with it.

"My work has always been very playful. There's a lot of depressing art – that's not what I want to put out there. Throughout all of history, patterns have been very decorative or very spiritual and artists have been trying to pull the two together. That's my quest, to pull the two together."

She concludes, "My work is about hope, about being up. All this patterning is like a stair step moving upward. To me it's about hope, joy and feeling life with a capital L."