

Poignant painter

Local artist's 'Sacred' series came straight from the heart

by Michael Catarevas
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There's a new angel in the Next Station to Heaven, with a paintbrush in her hand.

Actually, Laura D'Onofrio has been a New Canaanite for two years, but to gaze at this watercolor savant's stunning new body of work, which she calls her 'Sacred Art' series, one might think she had a connection to when God's Acre was created.

"I'd been painting pictures of cars, chickens, mailboxes... but they weren't particularly rewarding," explains D'Onofrio, 29, who was born and raised in Wilton. "I wanted to do something powerful, inspiring, and from my heart. I got into portraiture, which is, of course, very personal. And that led me to the 'Sacred Art' series."

The mother of two children, daughter Megan, 5, and son Caleb, 2, is a member of the Connecticut Watercolor Society. Two of her 'Sacred Art' paintings were accepted into the Society's 74th exhibition this summer in Hartford. They are 'The Most Precious' and 'Familiar Grace.'

Well over 200 artworks were submitted for consideration, 84 accepted, and 11 received awards. 'The Most Precious' received the Nancy Greene Memorial Award this past Sunday.

A graduate of Brigham Young University in Idaho, D'Onofrio studied art, but has only been painting for seven years.

"In college art classes, some students want to eventually teach, some to become graphic designers, some to be illustrators," she says. "We were all together in beginner classes, then moved into specialties. I enjoyed watercolor the most."

After spending a few years painting a variety of things, a friend recommended that D'Onofrio concentrate on portraits. "I tried it, and the second one I did, of my daughter Megan, won an award," she says. "I thought, maybe I've got something here. Now I consider myself a portrait artist."

D'Onofrio met her husband, James Cunningham, at New Canaan's Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, where she and her family have been worshipping since her childhood. With portraits her new focus, she started the 'Sacred Art' series, which has five paintings completed and one remaining.

In partnership with New Canaan's Christine Simmons, a photographer specializing in portraiture, D'Onofrio set about finding subjects in local churches. Once she found them, and their parents approved if the subjects were children, work began in earnest. All paintings in the series include one person, and the hands of Jesus Christ.

"My friend, Brent Alvord, is the Jesus," says D'Onofrio. "He's broad, and has awesome hands. I have

to paint him a bit thinner, and he always complains and says, 'I'm not a skinny Jesus!'"

The suede, white-fabric robes are hand-made by D'Onofrio, who minored in clothing construction at BYU. After Simmons poses and photographs the subjects at a variety of angles, D'Onofrio then chooses the one she wants to paint.

"Christine and I are very connected artistically," says the painter. "I usually have an idea in my head, but Christine is my eyes. She can see things as I imagine them. One of her poses is always just right."

D'Onofrio's award-winning watercolor, 'The Most Precious,' is her most popular work. She has sold many prints of it, and explains its deep, emotional meaning.

"This painting symbolizes the little ones that could not be in our arms here on earth. The children who were lost through miscarriage, or were stillborn; this painting represents them. Mothers wish they could keep their babies and watch them grow, but sometimes they cannot stay with them.

"I wanted to paint a portrait of peace for parents who lost these precious souls. A painting that when they look at it, especially the mothers who carried the children, will show that they are in heaven, safe, loved and protected."

Each work in the series has taken a month to complete,

because D'Onofrio spends most of her time as a mother, painting for an hour or so each night after the little ones have gone to bed. She's delighted to be living here, enjoying the many aspects of New Canaan life.

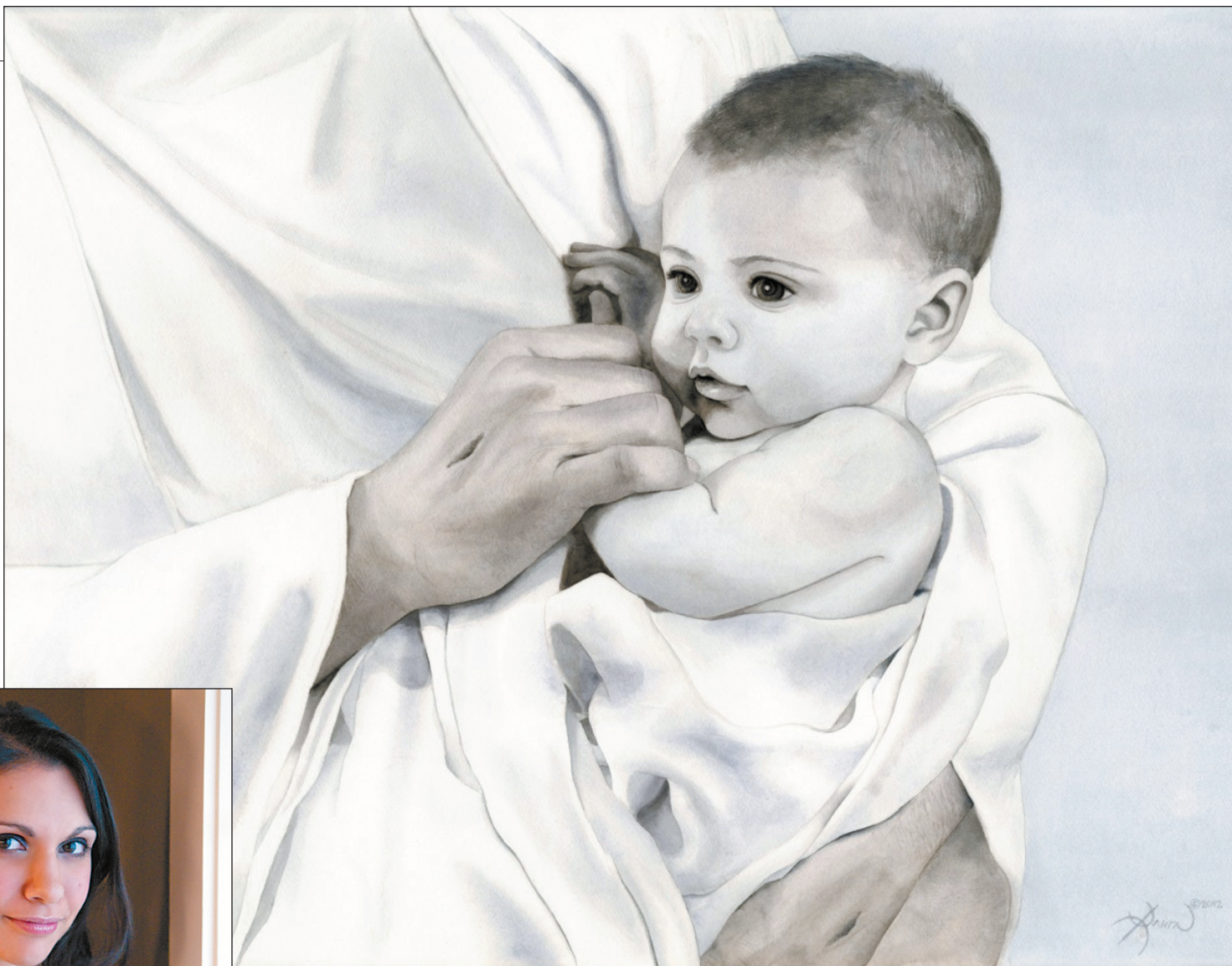
"I love where we live, which is near the library," she says. "I go there almost every day. And I love that there's a central town area, with sidewalks. We chose to come here because of the schools. Waveny Park is wonderful. I run the trails with a double stroller.

"Sometimes I feel intimidated being amongst millionaires. It's kind of surreal. But then I change my focus of thinking, knowing I'm surrounded by gorgeous homes with beautiful landscaping, and I can walk around and enjoy it."

D'Onofrio has started her final painting in the 'Sacred Art' series. It will feature Jesus, all alone.

"You won't be able to see his face," she explains. "He'll be reaching out. Unlike all the other paintings in the series, which were very muted color-wise, in this one his arm will be in color. He will be extending his hand, to symbolize to all who see it that it's their turn now."

Laura D'Onofrio's website, LauraDonofrio.com, includes all her work and contact information.



New Canaan watercolor artist Laura D'Onofrio, left, was honored to have her painting, "The Most Precious," above, awarded the Nancy Greene Memorial award this past Sunday at the Connecticut Watercolor Society's 74th exhibition in Hartford. The work is one of six in her 'Sacred Art' series.