

Postcards from Juniper Island

Festival International poster artist Ramsey Ayers, whose work will be on display for ArtWalk, creates another world in her vibrant paintings. By Nathan Stubbs



GO FISH Ramsey Ayers' paintings evoke images of the Caribbean.

Ramsey Gardes Ayers feared becoming another "starving artist" after graduating with a fine arts degree from LSU in 2000. So she decided to instead pursue a career in events planning and promotion. While many painters may fall back on other careers after floundering in the arts scene, Ayers' art took off while her promotions job never materialized.

"[Being an artist] is something you always dream about doing but, realistically, doesn't always pan out," she says. "I didn't find my niche in college. I always felt like my work was so mediocre. So, I kind of got discouraged."

After getting married and moving to Shreveport, Ayers began to find her artistic voice while experimenting with different paints and canvases in her studio, a small room overlooking the backyard of she and her husband's 1920s-era house. "I started doing paintings to preoccupy my time and started doing things that I never did in college and just got really excited about it," she says.

Now the 27-year-old Ayers, commissioned as this year's Festival International poster artist, is moving back to her hometown of Lafayette in the coming weeks with her husband Kevin. She's five months pregnant, and her career is reaching

new levels. She opens her first local studio exhibit at Galerie Eclairuse on Saturday, in conjunction with ArtWalk. "Lafayette has such a fond appreciation of the arts," Ayers says on coming home. "I think I'll be able to get into more avenues. I want to be more involved in the arts community."

Pegi Derby, artist and director of Galerie Eclairuse, says Ayers' work will be on display alongside artist Megan Barra's, through April and possibly into May. Barra is a renowned local artist, featured on past festival posters.

Both Barra and Ayers are unique in their use of fabric on their collage pieces, which should complement each other nicely in the intimate Jefferson Street gallery. "Ramsey's work is this imaginary world and Megan's work is the world of music, which is her passion," Derby says. "They're both painting out of this passion and their own worlds, which they have immersed themselves in."

Ayers calls her work "mixed media acrylic collages," all of which feature scenes from a utopian, Caribbean-esque world. The setting, a place Ayers calls Juniper Island, comes through in vibrant colors.

She cites French impressionists Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin for their use of color and pattern as major influences on her work. Local artist Mary Perrin says she

finds a musical quality to Ayers' use of repetition and syncopation. The Juniper Island scenes usually feature a lined pattern of trees or posed, surreal characters, offset by their buoyant facial expressions and loud colors.

In creating her work, Ayers decoupages her canvas with everything from foreign stamps to old letters to create a unique texture in which to paint scenes of life on the fantasy island.

In typical artist fashion, and unbecoming of an events planner, Ayers says her studio — full of decoupage materials, acrylic paints, and the fabrics she uses on top her paintings — is typically in a chaotic array.

"It's pretty scattered over there. There's stuff everywhere. Somehow I find it all," she says, adding she usually begins her pieces with only a general idea and brief sketch.

Her art, much like her career, seems to have a natural way of finding itself.

"I knew if I didn't do it now I might not have the same opportunity down the road," says Ayers, who is jumping into her art while at the same time interviewing for planning and promotions jobs. "We were just kind of at the right spot where it was the right time for me to try this. I never got to pursue that dream of being a party planner." ■