



In her cozy Midtown studio, artist Valerie Berlin spends much of her day painting but saves plenty of time to be with her family.

Home and Heart

This Memphis artist paints exotic renditions of clients' favorite rooms and their pets.

After a brisk morning walk through Midtown, the artist and her dog make the short trek across the yard from their house to a one-room studio. Manny, an Australian shepherd, immediately curls up in his favorite spot while his owner ties a smocklike apron around her tiny frame. She sits down at her drawing table, aligns her tools, and settles in to work.

For the next few hours, Valerie Berlin loses herself in the artistic process, creating a client's painting of a favorite room and favored pet. In the early afternoon, she puts away her supplies. With faithful Manny tagging along, she heads inside her 1905



ABOVE, LEFT: Valerie, husband Tom, and son Forrest admire the beloved Manny. If Valerie weren't an artist, she surmises she'd still work with animals in some way. ABOVE, RIGHT: "I put color on top of color," Valerie says of her process. "The painting just speaks to me as I go."

Memphis home, ready to spend time with her husband, Tom, and her son, Forrest. On most evenings, the family sits on the porch or in the yard, watching Manny romp. Neighbors out for a stroll often join them.



This sweet life marks the daily routine for Valerie, a fifth-generation Memphian. It's a small wonder, then, that her art features the same elements in life that she and her family treasure: home and pet.

got home and looked at the photo, the dog was there. So I painted the pet in the room," Valerie recalls. "It just seemed to snowball from there."

Now, she says, "I probably get contacted more often about painting the pet, but I still consider myself more of a room portrait artist. I have to make it clear that their pet is not the main focus."

Search for "pet portraits" on the Internet, she says, and you'll get numerous hits. "But when it comes to my particular style of including pets in the home setting, you don't get much," the artist says.

Art With Heart

Her clients range from savvy collectors to those commissioning an original piece for the first time. "I meet people who have saved money for years for one of my paintings," the artist says. "I take that as a big responsibility."

Valerie considers her paintings heritage pieces, showcasing rooms associated with beloved memories. Her works help "children remember that piece of furniture or where their Christmas presents were," she explains. Often, she includes precious mementos, such as anniversary gifts. Of course, the paintings also provide artistic immortality for special pets.

Once when she arrived at a client's home to take preliminary photographs, Valerie recalls, "There were toys all over the floor." The flustered client immediately began straightening the clutter. "I said, 'No, you'll want to remember this exactly this way,'" the artist remembers. "So she left the toys and ended up loving it."

She has influenced clients in other ways as well. "A lot of people have transformed their interiors after I've painted them," she says. Take, for example, what happened

"I call my paintings 'portraits of rooms.' The pet acts as a complement." —Valerie Berlin

with one of her biggest artistic challenges: a bachelor's pad. Besides his dogs, "all he had in the room was a leather couch, a big-screen TV, and some dead plants," the artist remembers with a smile.

After the client saw Valerie's livelier version of his room, he decided to transform the room into a replica of her painting—then promptly banned his pets

from the newly spiffed-up space.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

For more information visit www.valericberlin.com, or call (901) 276-5449. Prices range from \$2,200 to \$4,300, depending on size. Valerie has a waiting list, and each piece takes a month to six weeks to complete.



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THE NEXT
GENERATION

OF
HEIRLOOMS.



Valerie travels to clients' homes to take a photograph, which she uses to create her oil pastel interpretation on paper.

Exuberant Art

Riotous, improbable color explodes in Valerie's every painting. Red, teal, or perhaps purple walls frame furnishings covered in tomato red or animal print patterns, while black-and-white tiles or zebra-skin rugs cover the floors. Angled walls, doorways, and windows suggest the artist's imagination more than real-life architecture. The room's original furnishings show up in her paintings, but Valerie takes extreme liberties with color and perspective. A traditional decor of heavy woods and dark jewel tones, for instance, might become a stunning exploration of pink and teal with light-colored furniture. For more than two decades, she's delighted clients with her joyful take on the rooms they only thought they knew.

"I call my paintings 'portraits of rooms,'" says Valerie. "The pet acts as a complement."

Ah, yes, the pets.

An Artist's Best Friends

A dog or a cat, perhaps a bird, occasionally even a horse or a quixotic cow often lounges in Valerie's oil pastel creations. Her trademark style includes wild col-



ors and off-kilter perspective, but renditions of the owners' pets look 100% like the real deal. "I don't paint any purple dogs," Valerie wryly notes.

Animals became part of her art by happenstance. When she trained at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College), she says, "I always related to older homes and detail and pattern and color." Once, early on, while photographing a room she planned to paint, the owner's dog wandered into the frame and settled down for a nap. "When I



"I do the entire drawing in pencil," the artist says. "Then, like a kid with a coloring book, I fill it in."


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