



**THE
TWO
WORLDS
OF
SUSAN
RUSSELL
HALL**



ARTIST *of the* HEART

BY ALLEN COX | PHOTOS BY DANE GREGORY MEYER

Artist Susan Russell Hall works in two distinct worlds. One is a sterile operating room where the lives of critically ill children depend on the skill of a surgical team. Hall dons scrubs and, with sketch pad in hand, documents pediatric cardiac operations, often life or death struggles for the young patients.

Her other workplace stands in startling contrast to the first. Here, her work is a reflection of nature, often a marriage of realism in imagery and abstraction.

On the surface, Hall's artistic pursuits seem as though they have wandered onto two separate tracks, but a conversation with the artist about her work reveals a deep connection between the two, a connection that lies within the artist's own life experiences.

A peek into Hall's vast portfolio of medical drawings, work

she has been doing since 1979, confirms a hand adept at surgical precision. Her drawings have appeared as textbook and medical journal illustrations, as medical records, and as drawings that find new life in the hands of the young patients and their families. One child used drawings done during her own cardiac surgery in a science fair exhibit about her rare heart disease. Another used Hall's surgical drawing of his heart as a template for a tattoo, a reminder that life should never be taken for granted.

In contrast, the walls of Hall's studio display images from nature — butterflies, hummingbirds, and flowers, particularly the lotus, which is present in many paintings. »

Everything in her workspace is on wheels, so it can easily function both as a gallery and a workroom depending on the needs.



The walls of her workspace are covered in pre-made holes. She paints directly on the wall, and will frequently move canvases around.



Hall explains that the medium she uses in her paintings is "encaustics," meaning "burned in," a technique that originated in ancient Egypt. On carefully crafted, reinforced wooden boards covered with linen, she applies layers of beeswax and pigment, and then turns a torch on the surfaces to bring out texture and color. Over that, she uses oils to paint with the same steady-hand as in her medical illustrations, only the imagery is quite different.

In her studio—an uncluttered, clean space more like a gallery—the exhibit of Hall's paintings reveals versatile results in her use of the encaustic medium. Paintings vary in their underlying grid-like wax surfaces and differ greatly in color.

"I try to vary my palette quite a bit," Hall says. She points to a painting dominated by red hues, the only painting at that end of the color spectrum. She explains that she wasn't drawn to reds

for a long time, probably because of her exposure to the color in the operating room. But, now, she has decided to work with it.

Across the gallery, a golden-hued painting of an open lotus blossom and hummingbird offers a fitting reflection of what Hall's work represents: the awesome collaboration of nature and nurture. It's a harmonious painting whose warmth and unsullied message draw me in.

"The lotus is a symbol for heart," Hall says, gazing at the golden painting. "Compassion drives my work. For me, the lotus means love, trust and compassion."

I need no other explanation for the two pillars of Hall's amazing work. A woman who has spent decades meticulously documenting the human heart in all its maladies and states of repair is also a skilled artist drawn to images of compassion, championing one of the oldest artistic techniques of our civilization. »



WHERE TO SEE SUSAN RUSSELL HALL'S WORK
WOODSIDE/BRASETH GALLERY,
2101 9th Ave., Seattle;
woodsidebrasethgallery.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION
susanrussellhall.com



ABOUT SUSAN RUSSELL HALL'S STUDIO

In a building constructed on the edge of a tranquil garden only steps from her front door, Susan Russell Hall is living an artist's dream. Her bright, spacious studio, designed and constructed by Tacoma firm BCRA (bcradesign.com) is the culmination of years of daydreaming about her ideal workspace.

"I feel fortunate to be working as a woman artist in this space," Hall says. From personal experience, she knows that many female artists have to carve out precious space in their homes, often a kitchen or spare bedroom.

Her studio foyer offers a flood of light and an intimate view of

the garden. The central space is a 24-by-24-foot light-filled room with soaring ceiling that seems to float above timber beams and massive hardware. Abundant wall space and built-in hardware designed for ease of hanging paintings let Hall focus on the creative process, not on struggling to manage her workspace. A large back room serves as a work and storage space. In the corner, a spiral staircase leads to an office and library with an inspiring lake view.

According to Jeff Brown of BCRA: "The studio is known as the 'Lotus Studio' because of its lotus design." While the main space is square, the roof line with its dormers is reminiscent of a lotus blossom, an image central to Hall's work. 