

# *Painting with paper*

Piece by piece, layer by layer, Mary Karavos creates  
a rich combination of texture and colour





## Studying in Florence allowed artist Mary Karavos to find her voice

BY JULIE-MARIE INNES  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK IWANYSHYN

**G**uelph artist Mary Karavos paints with paper. And not just any paper. Her artwork is created from hundreds – sometimes thousands – of tiny pieces of imported specialty paper, carefully hand-torn, layered and meticulously placed on a canvas.

Masterfully manipulated by Karavos’ experienced hands, the paper layers reveal fantastical designs from abstract to realistic in a broad palette of hues.

“Making this art makes you stop and just appreciate all the little things that come with it,” says Karavos, in reference to the precious paper from Japan and Nepal she uses. “I respect the paper and how it is made.

“I’ll start with a fragment and I don’t know where I’m going, but that’s what’s interesting. Sometimes it takes on a fibre quality or sometimes a mosaic quality or a very painterly quality. The thing for me is not to resist when it’s taking on a life of its own. It’s almost like you’re having a dialogue with the art as you’re working on it.”

Karavos’ artistic dialogue has evolved in a career that spans almost 30 years. Along the way she has garnered prestigious awards and a loyal following, locally and internationally.

For her, art is not only a means of expression, but also a source of distinct pleasure. She describes the creative process as “being in the zone” and “meditative.” She hopes that sense of calm and reflection resonates with those viewing her unique creations.

“I hope my work moves them, that they engage with the piece and they almost go on a journey.”



Eternal Dance, 40"x 40"



Ethereal Light, 40" x 40"

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Karavos recalls childhood days sitting at the kitchen table in Toronto, colouring and listening to music. As a teen, she gravitated to the high school art room to create, eat her lunch and breathe in the environment.

Getting accepted to Toronto’s Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University) took her aspirations one step further, but it was her fourth year at the college that proved to be a game-changer. She applied to study at the school’s campus in Florence, Italy, and was selected for a year of advanced studies. The experience of living and interacting with like-minded artists enticed her to return to Florence shortly after graduating to work for an additional six years.

“It was exciting,” recalls Karavos. “If I didn’t get into Florence, who knows what I’d be doing today.”

Exposure to the renowned city’s Florentine light, beautiful architecture and art history was formative for Karavos. While she learned to work in many different mediums, a course in experimental art inspired her. More importantly, there was one assignment that literally “stuck” with her.

“I did an image of the Duomo, the Cathedral in Florence, and I thought: what if I do a mosaic and adhere little pieces of paper to the canvas? It was small, but I just worked on it and I felt like I found my own hand.

“It felt true to me and it’s allowed me to find my voice. I enjoyed it so much that I never returned to painting with paint. I experimented and now I am working in larger scale, but it’s taken years to get to this point.”

The paper is an investment for Karavos,

selecting only the best quality in solid colours and patterns. Travelling to the Japanese Paper Place in Etobicoke or sometimes Guelph’s Wyndham Art Supplies, she likes to touch the paper, see it and imagine how it could be used in her work.

The allure is not only the paper’s beauty, but also its tactile quality. She finds the specialty papers – hand torn and sometimes cut – create a rich combination of texture and colour. Piece by piece, layer by layer, she achieves a novel visual impact.

“It’s like instead of dabs of paint that you brush on, I am physically tearing my little pieces of colour and wetting the surface and adhering the pieces. There’s transparency, it doesn’t dry quickly so you can see how it changes depending on the weight and the blend. I make a decision where to add on and where to build depending on the inter-

action of the papers. It’s a nice rhythm and I’m in the moment seeing what happens.”

A variety of music from jazz to country helps her get into that rhythm. Much like her days as a youngster at the kitchen table, she is transported through music. Calling it a “moving” process, she feels it guides her orchestration of the many minute fragments.

“It’s almost like having the music come through me: that inspiration, hearing the sounds and then having it come through my hands and making art from the great music.”

Guelph has served as her base for more than 20 years. She works at her home and, more recently, at a downtown studio space. Feedback from her husband, son and daughter is a constant, and she credits them with offering her both

encouragement and thoughtful critiques. As a member of the Guelph Studio Tour for the past 10 years, she has developed a network of fellow artists who have become friends and local clients who continue to inform her work.

“You’d be surprised how many artists are here and doing very well with their art. I love how my art allows me to meet and connect with people. If I am doing a commission for clients, I feel it is an honour. I like having the dialogue and seeing the way people select a piece that speaks to them or how they are drawn to certain colours.”

Those pieces range in size – small, circular or, in one case, a special commission for a Toronto couple that measured a whopping 1.8 metres. The subjects also vary from realism and portraiture to abstract, and she welcomes working from photos her clients provide. Owners of her work live in her

community and the Greater Toronto Area; many pieces are shipped abroad to Europe, Asia and the United States.

Paula White Diamond Art Gallery + Design Studio in Waterloo has carried her work for the past five years, and the gallery owner and namesake calls her “a great find,” raving about her talent and work ethic.

“Mary’s been a hit with our client base. She’s a good listener,” Paula White-Diamond says. “Her format is really different. A lot of the work is in a circular format. It’s so unique and so meticulous too, especially the time it takes to create each piece.”

Among 60 other artists represented at the gallery, the Karavos technique is rare and staff take the time to explain it to intrigued visitors. “They’re usually really shocked when they see her art,” adds White-Diamond. “They’re not really sure what it is.



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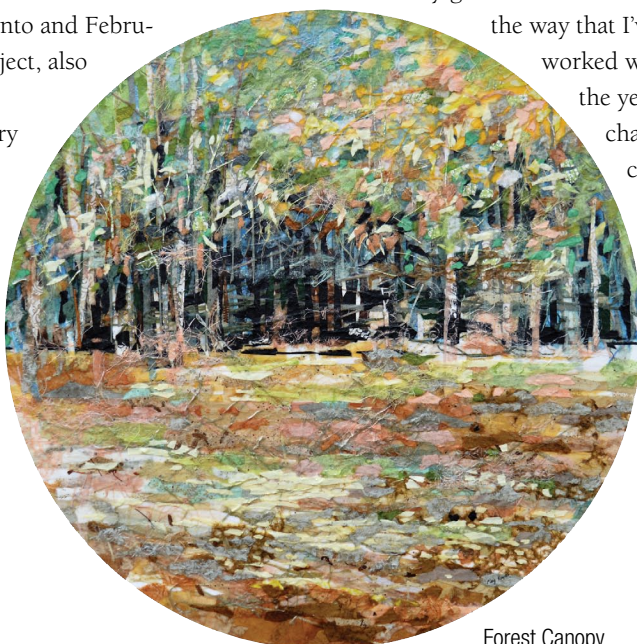
Then we go up close and explain the whole process to them.”

Karavos is a disciplined artist and carries a full workload that she refers to as “time elaborate.” New commissions, exhibits and shows keep her focused. The Guelph Studio Tour in October opened a busy fall and winter schedule. The Square Foot & Big Ideas show, from Nov. 29 to Dec. 14 at the Paula White Diamond gallery is next, followed by the One of a Kind Show & Sale in Toronto and February’s Artist Project, also in Toronto.

Spence Gallery in Toronto is showcasing

Karavos’ work in Toronto, Chicago and London, England. It is yet another avenue for her to gain exposure and new devotees. Declaring “it’s a great time for original art,” Karavos is captivated by the opportunities ahead for both personal and professional growth.

“I think what’s important for me as an artist is what keeps you curious and challenged and having that spark. I’m very grateful and I’m still excited by the way that I’ve grown and worked with paper over the years. It has changed, but the challenge is still there.”



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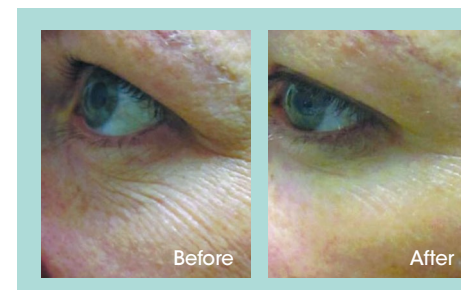
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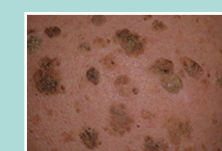
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