

15 MINUTES

Young artist imaginatively adrift in Southwest Florida

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For 20-year-old Erica Jeffrey, life looks different now after returning to Cape Coral, where she finds herself adrift in a no man's land of painting and poetry. Out of school but maybe not yet finished with it, working an odd job while living at home, in a place where many friends have moved away or just stopped going out.

Jeffrey moved back from Orlando recently to take a break from the University of Central Florida where she studies Art Education.

"It's a good school," she said. "I'd recommend it. I like the town a lot; it's a lot of fun, you know? There's a CD store on campus, and lot of restaurants...One time they had Bob Saget perform there."

Now Jeffrey works at Vocelli Pizza in Cape Coral. "It's hot in there working next to two 500 degree ovens." And she's trying to keep life simple and low-profile, while completing paintings on the easel in her bedroom at home, and writing poetry, disciplines she has practiced since childhood.

The readable and riotous poet and novelist Charles Bukowski continues to be a source of encouragement and enjoyment, she said; there are not many heartaches that a good Bukowski poem can't cure.

"I love his style, but I also kind of like his bitterness," she admitted. "(Bukowski) is an inspiration, because he can sit there and write a poem about nothing. That's kind of the idea when I write."

Although writing is something she does mostly "for me," Jeffrey hopes her paintings



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Erica Jeffrey with paintings.

eventually gain a wider audience.

"Mostly what I do is, I paint faces," she said. "They all kind of have a little abstract twist, but they're not totally abstract. If a painting looks completely real, it's not too interesting to me, but if a painting looks too abstract—if the general public can't relate to it — then it doesn't seem to mean that much."

Meaning also resides in the use of color, she said. Jeffrey often uses simple primary color schemes in her compositions, a technique she developed when she was 16 and attending summer classes at the Art Insti-

tute of Chicago.

"I never liked to work with too many colors," she said. "...Sometimes I like to use colors that are 'out there...' I love colors. It just makes everything more interesting."

The Art Institute's campus is spread out in downtown Chicago, and Jeffrey spent a lot of time wandering through museum halls, venturing into the city, and absorbing what it had to teach her.

"It was the only time I had an art professor I actually respected," she said. "Once he said, 'Now, Erica's art is cool because she doesn't use any techniques. Her art is like an

80s German Expressionist."

She wasn't sure exactly what that meant, just that 80s German Expressionist art is "crazy and out there." But overall, time spent in the Windy City left a permanent impression.

"I wish I could live up North," she said; in Chicago or Boston, for example. "But I've never seen snow, and I don't know if I could take it, so I'll probably end up living in the South, maybe Florida or Georgia."

Jeffrey was painting before she learned to hold a pencil, she said, and still paints mostly with her fingers. She uses brushes for details like eyelashes, or allows the paint to dry onto the bristles, then uses the hardened brush to make straight lines on the canvas. And she has a tendency to "fling" paint while she works; during the absorbing process of painting, sometimes the colors end up on the canvas and her knees, elbows and face, in equal parts.

"Pretty much everything I do is sort of like the opposite of what you'd be taught," she said.

Whatever she's doing, writing or painting, (Jeffrey also designs her own clothes; the pink, low-top canvas sneakers she wore were covered in words and designs), it is marked by the signature of her unique personality.

"If you look at them, they all sort of have that one thing in common," she said.

As Jeffrey continues to entertain other options like nursing school or switching her major to Art Marketing, that "one thing" remains undetermined, a kind of happy mystery that helps inspire an imagination. ■

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