

Artist's work mirrors shifting light in her life

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A flower bursting red into the air.

Rocks in liquid movement beneath clear water.

A tree, its branches blossoming into images of people.

In her drawings and paintings, Kristin Malone seems more intent on capturing fleeting glimpses of motion than in freezing an image into static permanence.

Even her current medium of choice — watercolor — helps to create this sense of movement.

"I was attracted to (watercolor) because of its spontaneity, its fluidity — the translucency," Malone said. "I love the effect primarily of light coming through filmy things, like water and leaves."

In many ways, Malone's art gives proof to the saying "Art imitates life." For Malone's life has been one of movement and change — a process she is still going through.

That process began in Elmira in the 1950s, when Malone was growing up and first became attracted to life as a woman religious. The attraction continued to grow, and in 1963 she joined the Sisters of St. Joseph.

During those years of growing interest in a religious vocation, Malone also discovered art. At that time in her life, art seemed more an avocation than a calling. When she joined the congregation, however, Malone's superiors asked what academic area she wanted to study, and she suggested art. "It could just as easily have



A family member's geneological research served as a catalyst for this dream-like painting of people and places emerging from trees. Most of Malone's current work focuses on nature scenes, but from time to time she experiments with other subject matter.



Artist Kristin Malone stands before one of her favorite watercolors "Iris," which was inspired by the works of Georgia O'Keeffe, whose paintings she admires greatly.

been history," she remarked.

Her suggestion was approved, and Malone went on to earn a bachelor's degree in art from Nazareth College and a master's degree in art education from the State University College at Buffalo. She then spent nine years teaching at Nazareth Academy in Rochester, on one year at the now-closed St. Agnes High School.

As she taught, however, Malone found herself being increasingly inspired to create her own works of art. "It was really through teaching art that I grew more and more compelled to work as an artist and identify myself as an artist," she said.

During those years of teaching and discovering her own sense of commitment to art, Malone began building a reputation as an artist, especially as a creator of art with religious and scriptural themes. She is perhaps best known for the series of calendars she produced for the Sisters of St. Joseph from 1970-83.

But as her awareness of her artistic calling began to emerge, Malone found teaching increasingly frustrating. "One of the reasons I left teaching was (that) I'd get started on a demonstration, and not be able to finish it," she said. She quit teaching in 1978 to move to the Sisters of St. Joseph

Prayer Center on Mt. Vernon Avenue, where she lived for several years while trying to pursue art full time.

While Malone was discovering her sense of vocation as an artist, she also was beginning to question some aspects of her life as a woman religious. Each year, for example, she had to request permission from the congregation to continue her pursuit of art. As part of the process, she had to submit a proposal and a budget, and undergo evaluation. "It was frustrating to have to prove myself, to justify myself," she said. "Even though I was given permission to explore art, the whole idea of my having to apply year after year to a strong call just (wasted) a lot of energy."

Questions about the restrictions of life as a woman religious — and questions about the role of women in the Catholic Church — coupled with her growing vocation as an artist led Malone to leave the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1983.

In a letter she wrote to Pope John Paul II to explain her departure, Malone appropriately chose art as a metaphor for her decision.

"As an artist, I begin a painting of a scene, and as I paint, the light shifts and the subject changes," Malone wrote. "So too,

as soon as I write words on paper and as I live another day, I see my life in a new light."

Although Malone now sees her life in a new light, her artistic vision is still shaped by her sense of spirituality. "I think what I do is strongly affected because of all the things in (my) life," she observed. "I think some of the social-justice concerns of the congregation and the church influence my work to some extent."

The focus of Malone's work has shifted from scriptural or overtly religious themes to nature. She observed, however, that her love of nature was fostered during her years as a Sister of St. Joseph. "I think there's just a sense, a desire for beauty and harmony, and these certainly were nurtured in religious life," she said. She noted that the theme for the calendar she did in 1981 was based on an Abraham Heschel quotation: "Our kinship with nature is a kinship of praise."

And she has not entirely abandoned religious themes in her work. Even after leaving her congregation she continued to create religious works on commission — such as the stations of the cross at St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads, or a



A neighbor's backyard garden provides an oasis for peaceful painting.

hanging for the baptismal area of St. Margaret Mary Church, Rochester. She also has in mind a work depicting women at the Last Supper.

But for now, Malone must concern herself with the more practical realities of making a living. She tried to survive as a full-time artist, but learned the income was too unsteady. So she turned back to teaching — first part time at the Episcopal Home, now three days a week at the Jewish Home. She also teaches courses in watercolor at the Memorial Art Gallery.

Today, Malone said, she finds teaching — particularly going back to basics and creating projects for her students — helpful in her own work and a way to stimulate ideas. The time limitations teaching imposes have also forced her to focus her work. "I savor the time," she observed.

Malone has applied for full-time teaching positions, though she has some doubts about the demands. "If I had a full-time job, would I have the time, would I have the energy to do things just for me?" she wondered.

Currently, she is preparing for the Clothesline Festival art show at the Memorial Art Gallery Sept. 9-10. The works that people will see at the sale will reveal Malone's current concerns and artistic focus. Still, she acknowledged, people who have known her art over the years may be tempted to read religious messages into it.

"I think some people think I paint mountains because I'm thinking of God," Malone remarked. "I paint mountains because I think they're beautiful."



By experimenting with different brushes and colors, Malone achieves the results she's looking for.