Dream Believer
Francene Christianson paints her past into sharp focus.

Somewhere in your home, you most likely have a box—or many boxes—filled with old photographs that you haven’t thought about in a long while. It’s what we do with old photos; we save them because there is an odd, sort of sad sentimentality attached to them. Your relatives were most likely not famous photographers, and they maybe weren’t even very good ones. But the photos are history—your history. It seems there’s not much else you can do but cram them in the back of a closet and keep them in the back of your mind. You know, just in case.

Minnetonka resident and artist Francene Christianson did no such thing when she received her mother and father’s collection of photos and slides after he passed on. And instead of just taking them out of a sense of duty, she has made something special with many of them. “If you turn them into a painting, they’ll be in your family forever,” she says, and explains that often she will alter the photos that are the basis for her paintings in some way, focusing on what’s important in the image. Sometimes, when you go through your old pictures, you have a lot of
A painting of a mother and daughter at a wedding is a perfect example. She simplified the background, which was busy with people and color, and slipped a piece of wedding cake into the foreground as an homage to Wayne Thiebaud, Christianson’s favorite artist. Though she’s modifying the photos when she creates the painting, she isn’t reinventing history or telling a story that didn’t happen. She’s creating a focused short story.

Her work, while much richer in palette, recalls the work of David Hockney in its simplicity and, by virtue of her work being culled from her childhood in the Los Angeles suburb of Inglewood, unmistakable Californian tone. That type of focus is also evident in the many still-life paintings she has displayed around her impeccably decorated home.

None of them are run-of-the-mill bowls of fruit by any stretch, but tight, detail-oriented close-ups of tomatoes and the like, with highly dramatic lights and darks. A triptych in the kitchen looks like a graphic designer’s dream, featuring parts of the fruit seamlessly overlapping from one panel to the next. Unsurprising, given Christianson’s former career as a graphic artist for several prominent advertising agencies on both coasts. Motherhood, a job transfer her husband received and growing unhappiness with the hours one must keep at an ad agency led her to this, an artist’s life.

The simplicity in Christianson’s paintings, specifically her landscapes, begins with her preparation. “I start with my photographs in black and white, and go from there. I find it really frees me up to experiment with color,” she explains, describing how she traces what she deems necessary onto the canvas before painting. But nothing looks surrealist; nothing rings false. In a way, it’s like working with memories in reverse: The hard, photographic evidence is there telling a story, but the story wasn’t captured correctly until now.

Christianson embodies the end result of unflinchingly following your dreams. She has worked hard to get where she is, and in return, she shows us the path she took there, not with words but with images. She has taken what she deems important from her past and revisited it; taken a good, hard look at what it may have meant, not with weepy nostalgia, but with an eye both stark and detailed. We should all be so lucky to have such permanence given to our lives, and it seems that Christianson knows she’s fortunate to be able to tell her story in this way. //

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Left: Healing oranges, Below: Liquid Shadows.

as featured in LakeMinnetonka