

&gt;&gt; BACKSTAGE PASS by Heidi Kurpiela | A&amp;E Editor

# Primal colors

Abstract painter Beverly A. Smith peels away layers of paint to reveal what lies behind her uninhibited brushstrokes.

Beverly A. Smith has experienced the kind of success for which some artists wait a lifetime.

The 52-year-old started painting four years ago, and already she's produced almost 100 paintings, nearly half of which have sold to fervent art collectors enamored with her intense brushstrokes and penchant for dense layers and vivid colors.

"For a kid who just fell off the wagon, I think I've done pretty well," Smith says. "Initially, it was scary. Most people don't wake up at my age and say, 'Ahh, I have this talent I never knew about!' It was kind of embarrassing."

A former Massachusetts gymnastic coach and physical education teacher, Smith is enjoying her second incarnation as an artist.

She's showcased her work in galleries from Tampa to New York City, and in February she garnered a full-page review, in New York's *Gallery & Studio Magazine*, in which her work was compared to 1960s abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler — a hefty accomplishment for any artist, much less an artist with no formal training.

If the metamorphosis seems like an overnight sensation to some artists, to Smith, who

## IF YOU GO

**Beverly A. Smith** is one of four female artists collaborating with Fuzi3n Dance Artists for "Dancing through the Eyes of Women," an art-meets-dance performance scheduled for June 3 through June 5, at Art Center Sarasota. For tickets, call 365-2032.

works out of the Celery Barn, in Towles Court, it feels like a long-time coming, the manifestation of years of pent-up emotions.

"People will look at a painting, and they'll ask me how long it took to create, and I'll say, 'Three hours,' and they'll be blown away," Smith says. "Then I tell them, 'Yes, but it took me a lifetime of pain.'"

The seventh of eight children, she says she spent years in therapy having grown up in a dysfunctional family plagued by mental illness.

Diagnosed with bipolar disorder in her mid-30s, Smith began painting as a way to cope with her turbulent past and relentless energy.

The first painting she ever produced, an abstract piece titled,



Heidi Kurpiela

"I felt like I had barnacles on me that were beginning to break off," Beverly A. Smith says of her first attempt at painting. "The creativity was fighting to get out."

"Emotional Storm Over Edgartown," was submitted along with an impressionist landscape to a show at the Attleboro Arts Museum, in Massachusetts.

Of the 300 pieces in the exhibit, Smith's abstract was one of two that sold.

"My husband and I were walking through the museum, and he turned to me and said, 'There's a red dot on your painting,'" Smith says. "When I realized what that he meant, I was like, 'Get outta town!'"

Smith, who lives in The Landings, still has the demeanor of a gymnastics coach and former gym teacher. She's athletic, loud and outspoken. She gets to the point quickly and breaks down her artistic process the way you'd

imagine someone who spent 18 years coaching girls through back handsprings would: with little frilliness.

She has a master's degree in physical education and exercise physiology, which she had expected to use to help rehabilitate cardiac patients at hospitals. Instead, she pursued art.

"I don't think I'd be an artist if I hadn't gone through all the things I've gone through," she says. "It's like peeling away the layers of an onion."

Walking around her gallery and studio, you sense the unbridled passion that makes her work so powerful.

The things that inspire her are rendered in thick gobs and lush streaks of oil paint: her 23- and

24-year-old sons, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean, her travels abroad, her left-leaning politics, even cartoons she grew up watching as a kid.

"I use a ton of paint, and I make a big mess," she says, gesturing toward the laundry room and shower stall inside her studio. "I'm a real dirt bag when it comes to painting."

Eventually, she says she'd like to do smaller, more refined work, improve on her figurative skills and try her hand at more representational landscapes.

"I've been a good student all my life, but I'm afraid I'm not a good art student," Smith confesses. "When it comes to this stuff, you can't anchor me down. It's too primal."