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CRISTINA NAVARRETE COHN....LIVING AND PAINTING WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

Painters work in solitude but require input to remain creative which may be why you see so many of them at art openings. If you attend gallery openings, especially in North County, you have probably seen Tena Cohn studying the art and enjoying the company.

Cristina Navarrete Cohn is not from San Diego but she is a native Californian, entering this world at Queen of Angels Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. She was born into a working class family, her father finished furniture and her mother worked in a marshmallow factory, but riches surrounded her. Chester Park, near the University of Southern California, was once very upscale and some of the old families still lived in their mansions when Tena was growing up there. She became friends with a Mrs. Doheny who not only had a large garden with a covered swimming pool but a tiled conservatory filled with plants from all over the world. Tena often spent entire afternoons pouring over Mrs. Doheny's collection of rare books and listening to her tales of travel and adventure.

Tena's parents worked long hours. Her mother would deliver her, still sleeping, to her grandmother at 5am where she would dress, eat breakfast and go off to school. After school she spent many afternoons with a neighbor, Mrs. Boren, a well-educated and cultured immigrant from Belgium with a fine collection of books. Together they studied the paintings of the early masters and Tena was particularly intrigued by her medical texts, which were filled with beautiful drawings showing how the human body worked. Her house always smelled good and they ate exotic foods like pumpernickel bread and Belgium chocolates, all passions Tena still has today.

Tena was not only being exposed to wealth but to a wealth of knowledge. She was not impressed by their wealth per se or the 'things' these people had, but rather by the knowledge they had from being educated. They understood and enjoyed life, they had options and opportunities. She was a kid in a candy store with a thirst for knowledge and she saw college as her way of eliminating boundaries.

Her Grandmother, who was a Curandera, or spiritual healer in the Mexican culture, also influenced Tena. She gave people peace and made their lives better with her special healing powers. This combination of influences led her to study to be a physical therapist, where her great joy was in working with patients so they could overcome their limitations and do the things they enjoyed in life.

Through a series of strict Catholic girl's schools, Tena received an excellent education and was well prepared for college. She received her training as a physical therapist through the University of Southern California program. She attended classes at L. A. County Hospital, where USC has their medical school, and Rancho Los Amigos Physical Therapy Center in Downey. She earned scholarships and supported herself for four years with a part time job as a Physical Therapy Aid at Daniel Freeman Hospital. This was a very bright and committed young woman with a goal.

knows how fragile life is and makes every minute count. She only pursues what she loves, and what she loves is her family and art. Tena believes art is beginning to play a more important part in people's lives. So much of nature is being destroyed. Art will provide a calm place to find peace. She hopes to leave the world a better place by leaving things of beauty.

Tena relates to the words of Emerson in his essay 'Nature' when he wrote "Every moment instructs, and every object; for wisdom is infused into every form. It has been poured into us as blood; it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure; it enveloped us in dull, melancholy days, or in days of cheerful labor; we did not guess its essence until after a long time."

"Art never lies and you can't fake it, so I never know what I will paint. I go into my studio, put on some music and sit. I'll ask myself questions like; 'How do I feel?', 'What do I want to say?', 'What's going on in the world?'. Being an abstract painter is hard because there is no object to paint. It is more like 'Okay, what am I going to put on there?' Each day it's different because each day I am different." Currently Tena is working on a series titled 'Look, now I can fly!'. The pieces are very colorful, full of uplifting happiness and hope. During the first two weeks of the war in Iraq all she could paint were heavy pieces in browns and reds.

To keep her creative juices flowing Tena is an ongoing student of Reed Cardwell's at the Athenaeum Studios on Park Blvd. Reed helps direct and re-focus her work and she enjoys the inspiring interaction with the other artists. She stays in touch with Ted Kerzie and they enjoy long philosophical discussions about the process of art. She enters and wins juried exhibitions and, of course, attends art openings.

In May, she was part of an exhibit with Alix Dumka and Kathy Marie Kenyon at La Esquina de Bodegas at the historic site of the Santo Tomas Winery in Ensenada, Mexico. Her work is always exhibited at the Joseph David Gallery, 760 Eighth Avenue in Downtown San Diego. The gallery is open noon to 5, Tues thru Saturday and by appointment. Call (619) 702-6290.

Tena graduated from this rigorous schedule in 1973 and began working at Children's Services in Santa Monica where she helped handicapped children. It was during that time she met, through mutual friends, a law student from Bakersfield named David Cohn. They were both seriously dating other people but her boyfriend was a medical student who needed to study and David's girlfriend lived in Bakersfield. For nearly a year, they enjoyed each other's company as 'just friends' but, gradually, it became evident they were meant to be more than friends and they became engaged. When David passed the bar, they were married on a cliff over the ocean at Palos Verdes and promptly moved to Bakersfield.

For a time, she practiced as a physical therapist at Bakersfield Memorial Hospital but when she had her twin girls, Tracy and Kelly, and one year later, another daughter, Jamie, she wanted to stay home and enjoy being a mom. The Cohn's were a very active and athletic family. All three of the girls were good runners and they also swam, played tennis, and kept horses. The family traveled all over California attending sports meets of one kind or another.

In 1992 Tena became very ill and was diagnosed with Valley Fever. This disease is caused when fungus, left deep in the earth, is released into the air during excavation. The fungus activates in the wet tissues of the nasal passages and lungs and quickly spreads to various parts of the body. Tena describes herself as having been a 'mean, lean machine, very healthy and strong' and it is fortunate that she was. She went from being well to totally disabled in one weekend. She was seriously ill for three months and spent over a year recuperating.

It is understandable that Tena was apprehensive about going outside and breathing any more of that dusty Bakersfield air. She began to find excuses not to leave her air-conditioned house. In order to get her out and participating in life again, a friend, Marsha Morris, promised to take an art class with her at California State University at Bakersfield. And, as they say, the rest is history. Professor Ted Kerzie recognized her talent immediately and became her mentor. Against his advice, afraid she would lose her spontaneity, she also began attending basic art classes at Bakersfield Junior College. There she discovered a soul mate in Chalita Robinson who taught her the fine art of printmaking and how to see something clearly so she could draw it. Today, student and teacher enjoy traveling together to visit museum exhibitions or attend printmaking workshops in places like Aspen and Santa Fe.

It gets really hot in Bakersfield and Tena's family enjoyed spending much of the summer in San Diego. In 1994, they were all in town for the 4th of July weekend and Tena was feeling competent again about driving and being outside. They were planning to have an early dinner and attend a movie in Hillcrest. She had dropped everyone off at the restaurant, parked the car, and was crossing the street to meet them when she was hit by a fast moving cyclist running a red light. Both the cyclist and his bike landed on top of her and she remembers she could not move her legs. She had a broken pelvis and spent the next year and a half recuperating.

It is a good thing that Tena Cohn is an optimist. She would tell you today that because of all she has been through, she is in a better place. Before she felt invincible; now she