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Tryon Artist Margaret Curtis Hasn't Lost the Fire That Made Her a Rising Star.

By [MATT PEIKEN](#)

[Margaret Curtis](#) and her husband, their two sons and a joyful chihuahua-dachshund mix named Sally live on a quiet, curvy street on a hill above downtown Tryon. From the surface, it's the quintessential American picture. Curtis doesn't paint such pictures.

"I came from a very, very dysfunctional family. All those tensions of what I would ultimately work from were there from a very early age," Curtis recalled. "While I was a mess in my teens and 20s, the things I saw and experienced provided just this treasure trove of subject matter to work from. I wouldn't have all these images in my head if not for the craziness."



In the family basement, where Curtis keeps her studio, you'll see large paintings on heavy wooden panels. The sunny earthtones and warm pastels come from Curtis' love affair with the Southwest, but Curtis roots her subject matter from a range of American dystopia.

Some paintings are curious collages of surrealist symbolism. In others, the color pallet doesn't disguise the darkness. She points to

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one, titled “American Family of Four.” A gray-bearded hunter walks through a snow-covered forest carrying a rifle over one shoulder and holding a bag over the other. The bag is brimming over the top with a tangle of human legs, blood trailing on the snow behind it. It’s among the paintings on a view in a solo show for Curtis at Mars Hill University’s Weizenblatt Gallery. The reception for “[Margaret Curtis: New Paintings](#)” is 6 pm Feb. 27 and the show remains up through March 15.

“A friend of mine who is very supportive of my work -- I posted this on Facebook - - and she’s like, ‘Oh Margaret, I love it. Where are they going?’ and I said “I think you need to look at it a little longer,”” Curtis said. “Her response was ‘No, no, no, how could this be?’ and I’m like, ‘I’m just darker than you are.’”

Curtis was born in Bermuda and raised in Chattanooga, Tenn. As a response to a patriarchal church, she recalls becoming a conscious feminist as a 12-year-old. She describes her teenage self as “every mother’s nightmare,” but school was her escape and place of calm. After earning her bachelor’s degree from Duke University, she pursued a second bachelor’s degree from the Atlanta College of Art largely to stay in school.

“I remember this tremendous fear of expressing myself,” she said. “I knew there was a lot of stuff inside that was uncomfortable and I was going to have to find a way to be honest about that and somehow balance that level of honesty with privacy and vulnerability.”

Curtis moved to New York City to pursue art and life. She turned the apparatus of cake decoration into tools for painting and she explored deflated balloons and other “failed but loveable” images as visual metaphors. Curtis sent slides of her work to every gallery curator in the city.

“I had no fear of rejection, and I’ve never had a fear of rejection,” she said. “That’s because -- this goes back to my childhood -- my father totally rejected me from an early age. That’s where the lack of confidence is, but it also means I also have nothing to lose. So what if someone rejects me? I assume people are going to reject me. When your parent rejects you, who isn’t going to reject you, right?”

One who didn’t reject her was [Marcia Tucker](#), founder of the New Museum of Contemporary Art. Twenty-five years ago, Tucker invited Curtis into a prestigious group show, marking her among the anointed ones of New York’s art scene. Curtis’ feminist, colorful commentaries on consumer culture brought invitations into



other shows, gallery representation and strong reviews from the New York Times and Art Forum magazine.

Then, Curtis gave birth to a son with a rare and life-threatening condition. The family soon moved to Tryon and, with her journalist husband earning a predictable income, Curtis dropped out of making art altogether to take care of her son, shuttling him to and from Duke University for care.

Here was an artist whose work commented on traditional gender roles now thrust into the role of caregiver.

“My brain was 100 percent given over to taking care of my child and making sure he was going to be ok,” she said. “I thought ‘Well, my life has changed. This is my life now.’ At that point, my priorities were so different. It was too painful to even keep up with what my peers were doing in New York, because I felt so inadequate in comparison. So I really just blocked (art) out.”

Her son’s health turned around. Not long after giving birth to a second son, Curtis felt called again to painting.

Her aunt’s suicide and her mother’s diagnoses of Alzheimer’s Disease, along with the 2016 election, have formed a chain of dark inspiration. Only now, Curtis is making art like most people do -- without a New York gallery rep, outside the eye of major art critics and away from people prepared to spend five figures on a painting. Curtis recently joined the fold at [Tracey Morgan Gallery](#) in Asheville.

“The ego part of me is like ‘Waaah, it was so great before.’ It was all good on paper,” she said. “But down here, I’m making work I really like and I’m able to do it without the incredible grinding stress of being an artist in New York.”

NOTE: A version of this story that aired during our news programs incorrectly stated Curtis pursued a master's degree while attending the Atlanta College of Art.