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## Gardening at Night

A North Side artist Sally Bowring explores the beauty of experience and aging.

BY [KAREN NEWTON](#)

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Ash Daniel  
Sally Bowring, a painting professor at VCU, explores her surroundings in an exhibit of abstract work in which rhythm, color and form take precedence over specific representation.

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In many ways, Sally Bowring is a woman for all seasons. Her new show at Reynolds Gallery, "Local Paradise," uses her 30-year artistic vocabulary to distill the life experience of a woman eminently satisfied with the place she's carved out for herself. Elements from past work — the grids of her work in the '70s, the houses of the '90s — blend seamlessly with bits and pieces observed on walks through her North Side neighborhood, Bellevue.

"There are a lot of triangles in my work," she says, pointing to canvasses while walking through Reynolds. "When I first began, the triangle was artist, wife and mother, and there was tension from that dynamic. Now the triangle is kitchen, studio, garden, and it's become much more beautiful and nurturing."

Bowring feels strongly about the separation of studio and house, a mental necessity even if the journey from one to the other is only a matter of steps. "But if I'm waiting for a painting to dry, I can go start dinner or go weed. If my work isn't going well, my garden gets very well tended," she says, laughing.

That garden and surrounding neighborhood are reflected in these paintings, including four canvasses that depict the seasons. "Summer Garden," the stunningly vibrant, large-scale work that opens the show and is the thematic image for it, began as a personal challenge.

"I was wondering if I could still do a really large piece," she says. "It takes time to do a work this large. When I had young children, it was hard. I would do larger works by putting small pieces together. With this one, I began with pastel colors and thought, nope, this isn't summer. I walked through the garden and realized summer colors are dark and bright."

Daily walks are an opportunity to observe and feel before translating onto canvas. "In my 20s and 30s, I never saw everything," Bowring says. "I lived in my head. Now I'm out there noticing everything. That's the good part of aging."

The painting "Fall" was inspired by glimpses of intense orange through bright green. "I consider surface a lot, whether things

should feel brighter, softer, lickable. When you're younger, you try to hold on and make things happen. At my age, I'm looking to see what happens."

Bowring teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, a singular pleasure for a woman who loves teaching but has little use for the academic world. Reading about art, filling her own mind and then sharing it with students is her way of having a stake in the artistic future. "I love the energy of young people," she says. "I'm honored that students 'get' me and that my classes are jammed. I respect them as artists but with that comes responsibility. My students say you give us too much freedom and I say, 'Yes, isn't it wonderful?'"

Despite being a native New Yorker, Bowring says she's always looking for serenity but is seldom at rest. Having rediscovered a passion for drawing, she strikes a deal with herself before allowing herself to watch television at night; she always draws while watching. When her husband asked what she wanted for Christmas, her list was short: drawing paper.

On her studio wall are three pictures with the word "gods" next to them: Aretha Franklin, Henri Matisse and Louis Armstrong. She acknowledges them often when working.

"Matisse is up there because of his work and the generosity to give to the viewer something beautiful and peaceful to look at," she says. "I feel like I was part of the last generation to romanticize and be optimistic about the future and what I wanted to do. I ask my students, what are you giving back to the world? It's really important to give back. I teach, I love my students, my neighborhood and my lovely husband. And I do think adding beauty to the world is important." S

*"Local Paradise" runs at Reynolds Gallery through Dec. 24, 1514 W. Main St., 355-6553 or [reynoldsgallery.com](http://reynoldsgallery.com).*

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