

Mom, daughter paint with words, palette

Writer Randy Sue Coburn in town for Bette Lee's one-woman show

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You can tell at first glance that Mom's chromosomes rule, as soon as you're face to face with Bette Lee Coburn and her daughter, Randy Sue.

Two handsome women, slender, playful, smart.

They welcome you into Bette Lee's busy studio. Its walls were conquered long ago by countless photographs. Among them there's a shot taken at a Greenville sidewalk art show in 1962. It shows a man clad in coveralls, peering intently at a large abstract painting by Bette Lee.

Lots of newspaper clippings crowd the photos. They're previews and reviews of the artist's many shows, from Greenville to New York to Cannes to London, to Ontario and Laramie, during five decades of intense productivity. They report the many national and international awards she has won.

Here and there, a family photograph gazes from the wall. Bette Lee closes in on one, circa late 1960s.

"That's Randy Sue," she says, pointing to the picture. "She danced."

"That picture was taken at the Little Theatre" in Greenville, the younger Coburn says with a laugh, adding, "It's like a museum in here."

Randy Sue lives and works in Seattle, and came to town to attend the opening of her mother's one-woman show, "Perceptions: Then, Interlude, Now," at the Hampton III Gallery through Aug. 5.

While in Greenville, she also had a book-signing at the Open Book for her second novel, "Owl Island," which was published this year by Ballantine. One reviewer described it as a story "that moves along like good jazz: smooth until it surprises,



zoom

Randy Sue and her mom Bette Lee Coburn in Bette Lee's studio
ALAN DEVORSEY / Staff

YOU CAN GO

What: "Bette Lee Coburn:

Perceptions: Then, Interlude, Now"

When: through Aug. 5

Where: Hampton III Gallery, 3110 Hampton Blvd.

Tickets: free and open to the public
p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Information: 268-2771 or

www.hamptoniiigallery.com

then smooth again."

As for her daughter's choice in husbands -- her son-in-law, Nick Fennel, is a painter -
- Bette Lee says that "she married her mother."

The abstract expressionist painter says she loves piling paint on canvas.

"It's very emotional. I like the surge, the feeling that comes while I'm doing it."

For years she wielded a palette knife. Later, she says, she "got up the nerve" to go to brushwork. A move from Chicago to Greenville in 1956 with her textile executive husband, Marvin Coburn, and children Mark and Randy Sue left Bette Lee longing for some kind of fit and artistic support in the small Southern town.

She soon solved that problem by volunteering to paint scenery at Greenville Little Theatre, and in no time moved from backstage to the footlights when the director found out she could dance.

She says the people she met at GLT formed the nucleus of her social support system.

And, Dr. John Richard Craft at the Columbia Museum of Art (1950-1977), saved her life artistically. After seeing her work, Craft offered her a solo show at his museum and became her most valuable mentor.

As for Randy Sue, her fate was sealed, says Bette Lee.

"I always tell her that her birth was horrible because she came out reading a book."

Just what you'd expect from the writer, she was shy in her youth and overwhelmed by her gregarious mom.

It's much like the relationship Randy Sue details in "Owl Island," between the main character, Phoebe, and her daughter Laurienne.

Randy Sue, a former arts reporter at the *Washington Star*, took to freelancing when the *Star* folded in 1981, and in the 1990s began writing screenplays, including the one for the 1994 movie "Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle" that premiered at Cannes and won a New York Film Critics best actress award for Jennifer Jason Leigh.

She supported herself with screenwriting while completing her first novel, "Remembering Jody," published in 1999.

With "Owl Island," Randy Sue says she unpacked a lot of stories that were burning inside her.

For nearly six years, she and her husband lived in a floating cabin on a river off Puget Sound. Its inspirational landscape colors the story of Phoebe, a net-maker, whose life is knotted into a complicated pattern of past loves, agony and renewal.

"We both love rewriting," says Randy Sue, sipping a glass of wine. "Mom takes an older painting and starts reworking it. I do the same with old stories."

As to her five-decade oeuvre currently on show, Bette Lee is a fickle lover.

"I fall in love with each painting I'm doing, and my latest one is always the one I love the best. And then, on to the next love affair," she says, laughing. "Still, each painting has every experience I ever had in the world, and everything builds and builds and builds on that. It's all your life."

"It's the same for us writers," says Randy Sue, running out the door to meet an old Greenville friend.