

New to art school, not to art

Christen Mailler of Northampton takes her great promise and greater hope to Boston museum program

Part of an occasional series

By MARY SANDERSON
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON
THIRTEEN years' worth of pastel designs, scribbles, stickers and posters cover the walls of Northampton High School graduate Christen Mailler's dimly lit bedroom on Hubbard Avenue. Candles, stacks of paintings and dried flowers gather dust

IN THE STUDIO

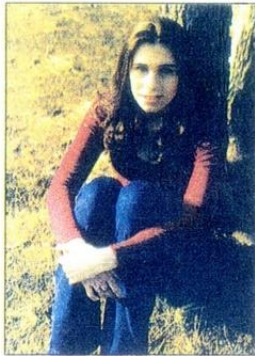
while clothes spill forth from her dresser drawers. Behind a sheer curtain hanging from the eaves over her bed, a television mumbles in the corner.

One heavy box labeled "Books" sits by the doorway. It is the only sign this summer day that Mailler, 18, was soon to leave for college at Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where she will earn a bachelor's degree that combines studio time with general education classes at Tufts University.

She's logged her first week there now, and in a quick visit home Sunday reported to friends and family, including her parents, Lee and William, that all was going well.

"In less than a week, everything is going to change," Mailler said that summer day, as if trying to convince herself it was finally happening.

For years, she has been buying furniture here and there for her first apartment, even though it barely fits in her room. And since her freshman



CHRISTEN MAILLER

year in high school, Mailler has been working at Chinese Kitchen to save for college.

But her preparations for art school stretch back to her early childhood — and Mailler has the boxes of artwork to prove it. "I drew all the time," she says.

In elementary school, she quickly established her reputation as "class artist." "I wouldn't have it any other way," she said. Each fall, she agonized over the possibility that a new kid might challenge her title.

During her middle school years, she stayed inside during lunch hour to paint



A work by Christen Mailler of Northampton, 18, who this month began to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional artist by enrolling in Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts.

medieval-looking women in long dresses. Instead of jotting down assignments in her class agenda, she sketched fantastical scenes over its calendar grids.

By high school she says she sloughed off her competitive edge. But Mailler concedes her peers helped quell her fears. "Kids that I had been in elementary school with helped me carry on my reputation as an artist, so I didn't

have a problem establishing myself." It took more than her classmates' testimonials to wow her art teachers. Mailler's commitment to her art and willingness to explore new methods earned their respect.

In addition to devoting hours of her class schedule to art courses at Smith College and independent high school art classes, Mailler brought her paintings home to work on them at night on a patch of floor space in her room.

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"She's had to work really hard to get her portfolio where it is," said Lisa Leary, an artist who has taught Mailler for the past three years.

When Mailler began studying with Leary, she says her work was heavily influenced by neo-classical art. But then, Leary's advanced art class introduced her to abstract painting.

"It changed everything," Mailler said.

Energetic brush strokes, utility knife cuts and torn off fragments repasted onto thick layers of paint and window screening distinguish Mailler's abstract art.

The change has been liberating, she says, as she recalls years of meticulous drawing. "I cannot imagine being a kid and spending hours with my mechanical clicky pencil doing fine line drawings and then cutting them," Mailler said. But now, she uses the utility knife as often as the paintbrush.

While she takes a more playful approach to art now, Mailler remains as serious as ever about her work and seeks her peers' honest critiques. "She would say to them, 'Tell me what you really think,' and she really meant it," Leary said, adding that Mailler believes criticism is essential to progress.

Her art evolved quite impressively, according to Leary, who describes Mailler's work as "exceptional" and "outstanding."

Art school admissions officers at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago seem to agree. Mailler's art work wooed them into offering her their top scholarships. The Art Institute even asked to use her portfolio for a marketing campaign.

Mailler turned down the Art Institute's offer because she did not want to live so far from home. Besides, Mailler said, "I really fell in love with Boston."

But what do her squares of scratches and globbed-on paint mean? Instead of waxing philosophical or political, Mailler offered a frank response: "I don't really know."

"At least not until months after she has completed a painting, when she can step back from her work.

"Whatever's been running through my mind for months at a time will come out in my painting," Mailler said.

Her father, a psychologist, sees scenes from the Bible in her latest series. Her boyfriend takes a different view of her art. In a painting with two figures standing in the shadows before a cross, he sees himself giving Mailler a back rub. Classmates from advanced art said they thought the figures were her parents comforting each other while their daughter prepares to leave the nest.

Mailler has no idea who the people are or what they are doing. But she proudly points to a less-defined figure with a halo of scrape marks who hides in the corner. "I have this intense feeling that this is what made the painting," Mailler said. "It's the creative energy."

Most of Mailler's works are not so illustrative. It is rare for her to include figures in her paintings. But sometimes, "it happens," she said.

To Mailler, forms are hidden underneath the layers of paint, waiting for her to uncover them. She describes the figures' emergence with the gleeful fervor of an archaeologist unearthing a relic.

It does not seem to occur to Mailler that she can control the painting. She sees the finished product as a compromise between the artist and the painting. "It's talking to you, and you're talking back at it. It's telling you what it needs, and you're telling it no, it doesn't need this," she said.

Usually, it is the work that is right, according to Mailler. And the painting always has the last word in determining when it is complete. "If it doesn't tell you [that it is finished] in a moment, it's going to tell you a couple weeks later," she said.

Mailler often returns to "finished" works and completely repaints them. While she admits she sometimes worries about adding or taking away too much from paintings, Mailler realizes destruction is just part of the process. And the process — not the product — is what matters most, she says. Mailler says her art has taught her to take the same approach to life.

She is not too concerned with selling paintings. While she fantasizes about earning a living from them, the dream is mostly inspired by a desire to stay home to devote more time to painting.

Mailler says she will most likely become a graphic designer even though she's "not in love with it" as she is with the fine arts. She sees it as a feasible way to include art in her 9-to-5 career before coming home to paint. "I want to make [art] an all-encompassing part of my life," she said.