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Painting the silver lining... Shannon's art takes flight

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Photos and story by Sonja Sinaswee

The great master Leonardo Da Vinci said: "Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return."

In the case of Shannon Hutchinson, that longing is so strong that she has combined her two passions — art and flight.

"My deep-rooted fascination with flight is an obvious theme in my work. Even if a painting has nothing to do with flying, there is a perspective I bring to a piece that I cannot escape," the artist said.

Flying is almost part of her blood. Her father, Mark, is a commercial pilot and she been flying for as long as she can remember.

"The cockpit and the view of my world from a few thousand feet above seems almost more natural than having my feet on the ground. The mere need to paint in the last few years comes from a longing to fly. It is far more exciting studying a turbine when I have found a way to make it an interesting linear drawing in an art piece."

At 24, the brown-haired beauty has her Trinidadian and Canadian commercial flying license and a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, Canada.

She majored in painting and drawing, doing her thesis in a place most aspiring artists dream off seeing — Florence. Regarded as the birthplace of the Renaissance, the Italian city is the home to Michelangelo's David, Botticelli's Birth of Venus, and Raphael's Madonnas.

During our playful photo session Hutchinson, whose work is currently on show in an exhibition at Horizons Art Gallery, St James, fondly recalled her time in Italy.

It was her decision to go to Florence to complete her art degree that caused her to miss several opportunities to fly with regional carriers.

"As hard as it was to not come home to fly, it was a no-brainer. All the guys that I went to flight school with have jobs now. I am happy for them but it wasn't my time. I've been back home for about a year now and would love more than anything to be flying again."

Although her aviation career might be on pause not, Hutchinson's art is definitely flying forward.

In her current display, where she shares the spotlight with two other artists, Hutchinson's paintings were conversation pieces; their fresh and interesting perspective provoking keen discussion among guests at Tuesday's private viewing.

"A lot of my paintings are landscapes as seen from the cockpit, some are more abstracted than others — the sky may be pink; there may be a map buried in the clouds," she explained.

"As a pilot you have to think a few miles ahead and plan your flight because you are moving so quickly. It makes sense to me to see a grid of highways in the sky, notes on weather or track lines in the glass of the cockpit at the same time.

"Spatial awareness is a theme I've been working with as I try to put on to canvas the feeling of floating peacefully a few thousand feet up, while travelling at a few hundred knots. A statement like that may seem to be an oxymoron but when we look out of the cabin window down to the clouds below and up above there is a calmness to the viewer. We do not feel as though we are zooming through the air to our destinations."

The idea to combine her art and pilot training came during a 2003 workshop with Scotland-born, Trinidad-based painter Peter Doig.

"I took a master painting class with him at the CCA7 before I went off to do my fine arts degree. He encouraged me to put more of 'me' into my work and to stop hesitating putting my flying on canvas."

That singular piece of advice, Hutchinson said, transformed her perspective. It has even allowed her to push the envelope with her process, doing things like mixing her own paints using techniques from the 15th century.

"It is incredibly liberating to be able to break every flying rule on a piece of paper or make a mark in a way I was told not to in my foundation year at art school."

A bit of a rebel?

Indeed.

Her choice of profession is an example of her determination to chart her own course.

"I will never forget admitting to my guidance counsellor the week I graduated high school my secret desire to fly. I received a scolding for thinking that an artist (I had opened my first solo exhibition just a few weeks earlier) could possibly be a pilot. I wish I had his address now."

The impressive fact that she is on the short list of female commercial pilots in the region hasn't changed people's perspectives.

"People usually think that I am a flight attendant when I say that I fly or went to flight school," Hutchinson said laughing. "Most days I have a great sense of humour about it but it is a bit tiresome when I am pressed for intimate details like if I'm to quit when I get married, whether or not I want kids. Some people have even gone as far as saying they would never fly with me because I am a woman."

But the intelligent and inspired Hutchinson remains undaunted.

"Look, I can talk a guy under the table about engines. A man is just going to have to deal with that."

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