

Watercolorist SARI STAGGS

by Carol Child

In the beginning and at the end of your career, you get to do what you want," says watercolorist Sari Staggs, relaxing over a cup of herb tea in her immense, bright studio in a converted L.A. warehouse.



Staggs, 42, single mother of four (ages 16 to 22), spends her time painting at one of several large drawing tables, and jetting to and from her art shows in such places as Sun Valley, Idaho; Jackson, Wyoming; Scottsdale, Ariz.; and Minneapolis, Minn. Occasionally she recovers a few hours to tend her garden at her adobe "Hansel and Gretel" house tucked away among the trees in Manhattan Beach.

Staggs, who, up until last September, produced a gallery show every six weeks, has supported herself and her children on her art since she was 26, when her big break emerged. A gallery owner offered her \$150 to produce 10 paintings a week. "If I had known what I was getting into," says Staggs, "I would have jumped off a bridge right then.

"I thought all I had to do was earn \$150 a week and drive the kids to their various schools and make peanut butter sandwiches, and we would all watch 'The Brady Bunch' at night and everything would be fine. But you don't think when you're taking on that commitment that someday somebody's going to need \$8,000 a semester to go to college, or shoes at \$50 a pair, that everybody's going to have acne and need braces and glasses, and that somehow that \$150 a week is not always going to be guaranteed. But if it were not

for that decision, I wouldn't have this studio. And I wouldn't be painting the paintings I paint, or probably any other paintings."

Staggs' paintings in recent years have evolved from sensitive and colorful depictions of American Indians to broad washes and lines in watercolor, pencil and acrylic on handmade paper from India. Staggs considers her art-making to be increasingly complex. "I used to flood the board with color, do some details and be finished. Somehow my work takes more time now." She picks up a painting in a gray wash, tinged with yellow and green. "It isn't finished," she points out. "It's too easy to stop there. There's a certain point where art has to look absolutely effortless, as if it was as natural as scrambling eggs. But

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it also has to look like 'How did you do
that; how could *anybody* do that?'"

Until a gallery owner offered her \$5 extra
per painting to "throw in some color,"
Staggs religiously did black and white,
mostly drawings of nudes in charcoal and
ink. Later, for another gallery owner, she
agreed to paint flowers in watercolor. "I
hadn't painted in that medium for 10 years,
and I'd failed my watercolor class. And, so
I thought, 'Well, it's a step.'

"So that's how the process started,"
Staggs recalls. "You make this stuff, and
it reflects who you are and what you went
through, and it also lets you find out what
people respond to. On that level it was
pretty, smiling faces — people who never
look unhappy — who look like they never
have any feelings except sheer Disneyland

delight. Girls with flowers. That was the
level that they wanted me to do. It was like
a kind of death for me. I use a word for
that whole approach to art: Lobotomy art.
You take all the emotions out of it, all the
potential for any kind of upset feeling or
commitment, and you do a million of them,
and you never upset anyone. You never
challenge anyone, you never do anything
except turn out this kind of Wonderbread
pack that will never be too salty, never have
any finger marks in it. You have to meet
a market; that's the frustration."

Meeting a market is easier for Staggs
these days, though, now that some galleries
are giving her a free hand. And, as of last
September, Staggs has given herself more
free time for her art, by eliminating a couple
of her annual shows. "There should be

more involved to being an artist than pro-
ducing a million paintings and then getting
on an airplane and showing up for an open-
ing," says Staggs.

"It's a dilemma," she continues. "You
have to be a good business person. But the
thing you started out to do was to be an
artist and make something worthwhile. And
that involves thinking and not always be-
ing concerned with what is going to sell,
or worrying about cultural expectations. In
our culture, if it doesn't sell, it isn't con-
sidered to be any good; and if you take too
long to do it, then somebody else will be
bought. And so, the priorities are a little
bit askew."

But Sari Staggs keeps her priorities all
neatly stacked, for she is busy doing her
things and the people are buying them.

