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journeys

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NATURALLY COLORFUL AND CREATIVE

Painter, designer, teacher, and eco-entrepreneur Carolyn Gavin embraces creativity in every corner of her life

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Carolyn Gavin's world is full of color: bright florals, playful designs, scenic landscapes, and even her graying curls. Known for her fun animal stationery designs and vibrant watercolor paintings, Gavin's art is a reflection of the life she's built: intentional, eclectic, and bursting with joy.

"I was raised in a very colorful and exotic place, with beautiful plants and colors all around me," the 58-year-old, Toronto-based artist recalls of her childhood in South Africa.

Growing up in the 1960s with two brothers, Gavin's early years were filled with nature, animals, and creativity. "I started painting when I was 3 or 4, and my parents recognized I loved it," she says. By the time she was 9, they had enrolled her in weekly private art lessons.

"My art teacher taught me the basics I still use today: technique, watercolor, gouache," she says. "We did still life, landscapes, pen and ink — everything. I learned so much from her."

After a decade of lessons, Gavin enrolled in graphic design school at Technikon Witwatersrand, where she spent three years. "After school, I worked in advertising and graphic design for a couple of years," she says.





Then her family immigrated to Canada, giving her the perfect excuse to roam. "I was back and forth between South Africa and Canada, then everywhere," says Gavin. "I couldn't settle down. I didn't want to settle down. I look back now and think, 'Oh my gosh, I was so free!'"

The path to earth-friendly art

Eventually, Gavin was ready to put down roots in Canada and create art again. One of her brothers was already running a home accessories business, so Gavin joined the effort with her other brother. Together, they built out a line of paper products.

"We were creating and selling wrapping paper, note cards, journals, growth charts, photo albums, scrapbooks — anything to do with paper," she says. "It took off, so in 2007 we decided to focus just on paper. That's when Ecojot was born."

Ecojot wasn't just another stationery brand. "We didn't want to mass-produce items you could find at any dollar store," Gavin explains. "We wanted to make something special, something that stood out, and something that created less of a footprint."

Ecojot was an early pioneer of eco-conscious paper products, using 100% post-consumer recycled paper, vegetable-based inks, and sustainably sourced materials. They also brought a bright, modern twist to the recycled stationery industry.

"Before then, recycled stationery was very bland," says Gavin. "It was all plain brown paper. We added color, animals, and fun, and it did amazingly well."



Bold combinations and creative connections

While leading design at Ecojot, Gavin taught herself Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop to combine her graphic design skills with her lifelong love of painting. "I definitely put in 10,000 hours," she laughs,

referring to the idiom suggesting that it takes 10,000 hours to master a skill. "I sent my work out and got a lot of rejections, but I kept going. I got better. And then those same companies came back to me."

Her whimsical painting style, shaped by the colors of her childhood in South Africa and her years of global travel, began to emerge. "My style is influenced by everything I've seen," says Gavin. "New scenery, new colors, new sounds."

During a trip to New York for a surface design trade show, Gavin met Helen Dardik, a fellow artist turned dear friend. "Helen and I had so much in common when we met in 2008," says Gavin. "She introduced me to her agent, who became mine too, and we've been on a similar path ever since."

Gavin and Dardik decided to host a painting retreat in Los Angeles. This first workshop was a turning point in Gavin's art career, combining two of her greatest loves: art and travel.

"I love to travel and teach art," she says. Since then, Gavin has led workshops in Belize, Canada, France, India, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam. "It doesn't feel like work. It feels like being in a room full of fellow artists painting. It's lovely."





Earlier this year, she launched an online painting course for those unable to travel. "Painting is like therapy and meditation," says Gavin. "It teaches people to get out of their heads and just paint."

Flowers, curls, and embracing natural beauty

One of Gavin's signature painting subjects — women with big, blooming flower hair — started from her own artistic exploration.

"Even though I'm not great at drawing full figures, I worked out that I could draw heads," she says. "So I started combining them with big hair, but flowers instead. They became symbols for me of strong, powerful women."

The symbolism is rooted in identity. "Hair is so important for a woman. It's such a big part of you. And if you don't have hair, that's a big part of who you are, too," she says. "These paintings are about strength, power, and individualism."

Like her art career, Gavin's own hair journey hasn't been linear. She's had thick, curly hair her whole life, but experimented with straightening and short cuts throughout the years. "As a teenager, I tried to straighten it. Then I had a short-hair phase, so it wasn't curly, just short," she says. "But in the last 10 to 15

years, I've really embraced my curls."

That embrace deepened about a year and a half ago. "My hair started falling out. I thought, 'Is it the dye?' So I stopped coloring it, and I've been letting it grow out." Now nearly all gray, Gavin says she's learned to love it. "I didn't like it at first. I always loved my brown curls. But now, I love that I don't have to color it. It's easier. And I like how it's getting lighter. I love white hair now."

Her hair routine is self-described as low-maintenance. "I don't have time for 10 steps," she says. "I wash it once a week, then wet it the next day, scrunch in some product, and let it go."

And her advice for others navigating their own curly or gray journey?

"It's a process," Gavin admits. "But if you can embrace the more natural part of yourself, I think it's better."

Life outside the art studio

Creativity doesn't stop when Gavin steps away from her canvas. Whether she's walking, cooking a colorful vegan meal, or spending time with her family and dog, she sees the beauty in her world.

"I love animals, that's why I became vegan," says

Gavin. "I didn't do it for health reasons, but the two go hand in hand. I cook vegetables, vegetables, and more vegetables. And tofu, I'm very good at making tofu."

When she's not painting for work, she still paints for herself. She also finds balance in restorative activities like unplugging, reading, swimming, or "doing nothing, which is my favorite thing," she says with a smile.

With a grounded, gentle energy about her, it's no wonder Gavin's art evokes feelings of joy in all who see it.

"I'm a pretty happy person," she says. "If my dog's okay, my parents are okay, my daughter's okay, and my husband's okay, then I'm happy and ready to create happy art."

INSPIRATION AND DREAMS

- Gavin most admires the modern masters Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.
- "There's one abstract artist, Heather Chontos, whose work I love, love, love! I'm actually going to her art retreat in Portugal this September."
- Dream projects for Gavin include painting murals in cities like Barcelona and London and working with a designer brand like Burberry.
- Next on Gavin's travel bucket list are Sri Lanka, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland.

