



Photo by Julia Lynn

a CHARMED LIFE

Intuitive and intellectual,
artist Brian Rutenberg
finds clarity at last.

He lives and works in New York City though South Carolina is ever on his mind. Just listen to the titles of his paintings—*Calabash*, *Song of the Santee*, *Waccamaw*, *Riverbend*, *Little Tide*—and if you guessed Brian Rutenberg’s boyhood was spent poking around the tidal pools, wide rivers and cypress flats of the Lowcountry, you’d be right.

At age 44, Rutenberg is at the midpoint of what appears to be a charmed life. He is an accomplished painter who is paid handsomely for his work, which is sought after and collected by individuals and museums. He is represented by prestigious galleries in several major U.S. cities and has racked up numerous awards, including a Fulbright scholarship to Ireland in 1997.

A few months ago Radius Books in Santa Fe, New Mexico published *Brian Rutenberg*, a meticulously produced, oversized book of the artist’s paintings with text describing his evolution as an artist. The art world rarely bestows this kind of honor on such a young artist.

Rutenberg is tall with boyish good looks. At a packed opening of his new show — *Tidesong Images* at the Jerald Melberg Gallery in Charlotte last March — he greeted friends, collectors and those new to his work with equanimity. Dressed in casual black, there was nothing of the scruffy artist about him. For someone so accomplished, he was open, friendly, accessible, unpretentious and articulate.

He is married to Kathryn, an obstetrician-gynecologist with a practice in New York City. They live in an apartment on the Upper West Side with their daughter Olivia, 7, and son Christian, 4. The Charlotte show was a family affair with Kathryn at his side during the opening and Olivia and Christian happily romping through the gallery the day following.

South Carolina roots

But the story of Rutenberg’s success as an artist begins in South Carolina, where it continues to be nurtured today.

First there were John and Sandra Rutenberg, parents who recognized their son’s talent early, then had the wisdom to stand back and allow it to develop. “We didn’t discourage him at all,” said



Blue Point, 2008-9

John Rutenberg, a real estate lawyer in Myrtle Beach, where Rutenberg grew up. “We appreciated what was happening. We did what we could to support him. Deep down inside, I thought he’d do all right. He’s single-minded. He’d do it even if he didn’t make a living at it.”

John Rutenberg recalls watching his young son draw, paint and construct things. “He was experimental.”

Rutenberg’s memories are similar. “I was known as the kid who could draw. By the eleventh and twelfth grades, I was serious. I felt totally committed. It was my thing. I knew I had a natural ability.”

Then there was the College of Charleston.

Rutenberg enrolled there in 1983 and soon was thriving as a young painter. Thrilled by the whole arts scene there, “I got the key to the fine arts building and had the complete run of the place.”

Not only did he paint and draw at all hours of the day and night, he built sets for plays, exhibited in the college gallery and continued his teenage interest in playing drums.

Even as his career progressed with a move to New York City in 1987, he’s kept close ties with his home state, where through the years he’s enjoyed receptive audiences. In the 1990s Rutenberg had shows in Myrtle Beach, Charleston and Greenville, some of those repeat performances.

Substantial recognition came in 2006 when the South Carolina State Museum sponsored a major retrospective of his work. That same year Rutenberg was artist in residence at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

Even more recognition comes his way this fall when the Tidesong Images show that debuted in Charlotte goes up in the main gallery of the Gibbes Museum in Charleston. It will be his first solo exhibit in the building where his student work was displayed in a group show more than two decades ago.

“It’s a tremendous honor to have a solo show,” Rutenberg says. “I love that museum. Angela Mack (deputy director of curatorial affairs at the Gibbes) has been good to me since I was in college.”

His work was included in a 2005 Gibbes exhibit titled *Beyond Representation*, and viewers were impressed. “We realized people wanted to see more of his paintings,” says Pam Wall, associate curator of exhibitions. And with so much representational art in Charleston, “I think it’s important Brian’s an abstract painter. It’s important for younger artists to see there’s other art as well.”

During the Melberg opening in Charlotte, Rutenberg spoke about painting and his life as an artist. He spent more than a year preparing paintings for this one show. His method is to work on several “thematically and color related” canvases simultaneously.

He doesn’t scrimp on materials. He buys the best—custom, heavy-duty stretchers, for instance, because his canvases must support the enormous amount of paint he’s using. It can be thickly applied or scraped. Sometimes it is allowed to drip and sometimes it is put on with something other than a brush — a piece of cardboard, for instance, or even his fingers.

He draws no sketches before he begins a painting and mixes paint on several palettes, taking care to include both warm and cool, shiny and matte colors.

“When I get an interesting range of colors I begin to bring in brushes. I begin really thin with soft masses of dark, a technique I got from Gainsborough. In my paintings light cascades from the top.”



Pale Silent, 2008

Though he does no preparatory sketches, there is an order in the paintings, as if the artist knows exactly what he wants to accomplish. The goal, he said, is clarity, something he’s been working toward for years and something he feels he’s achieved with the *Tidesong* paintings.

Inspiration and changes

Gradually he’s moved from using muted colors to bold bright ones. He attributes the change to becoming a father. “After my children were born my color blossomed.”

Just as gradually images relating to actual landscapes are fading, leaving more to the viewer’s imagination. And he is increasingly drawn to painting large. Several

new paintings are 13 feet wide, requiring the kind of wall space offered in the Gibbes’ main gallery, for full effect.

A fan of Archibald Rutledge, South Carolina’s first poet laureate, Rutenberg often borrows expressions from Rutledge to name his shows. *Tidesong* and *Riverbend* are examples. “I love his

use of his language. It suggests unfulfilled longing or yearning.”

Influences are many—the special light of the Lowcountry, visits to Ireland and Italy and the northern woods of Canada, the color theories of the 20th-Century painter Hans Hoffman and cubism.

“Cubism changed our way of seeing. To me Cubism represents conflict, the conflict of wanting to represent nature but remain true to the formal properties of painting (flatness). For me, all art must have an element of unresolved conflict and unfulfilled longing. Cubism suggests questions without answers. The pleasure is in the seeing.”

Rutenberg’s enjoyed mentors throughout his career—undergraduate and graduate teacher/painters Michael Tyzack at the College of Charleston and Gregory Amenoff at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Rutenberg received a master’s degree in fine arts from SVA in 1989. He found Tyzack’s gentle soul something worth emulating. Tyzack, now deceased, recognized his student as something special.

“He’s fearless and willing to try anything,” he said of Rutenberg in a 2006 story published in *The State* newspaper. “He has not lost that notion of innocent curiosity.”

Rutenberg’s long friendship with Amenoff began in graduate school and has developed into something more collegial over the years. Today the painters have studios in the same building. They enjoy



Oleander Study 2, 2009

discussing art and often attend exhibitions together. Amenoff wrote the preface to the new book about Rutenberg.

The unexpected mentor is Glenn Gould, a Canadian pianist who died in 1982 at age 50. Rutenberg was still an undergraduate at the College of Charleston when he happened to hear Gould's second recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The experience made such an impact Rutenberg set out to learn all he could about Gould.

He learned that though Gould was exceedingly gifted and in demand as a concert artist, he was totally devoted to living a principled artist's life, even if it at times cost him popularity and adoring fans.

"It is about how one crafts one's life as an artist and how one protects it," Rutenberg said of his interest in Gould. "It's that inner awareness beyond the notes, a shared consciousness between viewer and artist."

Rutenberg is articulate about what he's trying to achieve in his work. Having studied and thought about the rules governing painting for years, he allows that "if I know the rules I can break them."

He's thriving on the discipline his family has imposed on his life. Now he must fit his "workaholic" tendencies into business hours and learn how to transition from selfless at home to completely self-absorbed in the studio. "I'm actually more productive now that I

have children. I think this is Gould on my shoulder telling me how you do it. There are no shortcuts."



The Fading 2, 2008-9

A jury of peers

"People like Brian are few and far between," said artist and teacher Susanna Coffey, a close friend of Rutenberg's in New York City. "Brian has high standards for personal as well as professional behavior."

Coffey became friends with Rutenberg in the early '90s when they had studios in the same building. "I was conversant with Brian's work on a day-to-day basis. I was moved by his dedication and lack of arrogance."

She described Rutenberg's paintings as "beautiful and gestural. There's an open luminous area in the center of his paintings where there's a feeling of light and openness.

"The paintings are about nature in an unmediated state," Coffey continued. "There's a deep feeling of light that resonates and an intensity about his work. They're abstract, but clearly landscape."

Notes Pam Wall, the associate curator at the Gibbes: "He's unique as he's followed his own path. He has confidence. He doesn't let trends impact his art. Though he's had wonderful teachers, I think he's also self-directed.

"I'd say there are very few artists who can work with color that bold, yet keep such a good balance. You can almost go out of control, but he doesn't. It's amazing he can work on such a large scale with color. He's so intellectual. But he's also intuitive. He doesn't over-think. He can let it roll. He's very impressive." ●

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*Charlotte freelance writer
 Rosie O'Rear profiled Lancaster
 sculptor Bob Doster in the
 autumn **Sandlapper**.*

*Artwork photos courtesy
 Jerald Melberg Gallery,
 Charlotte, N.C.*

Brian Rutenberg: Tidesong
*continues at The Gibbes
 Museum of Art in Charleston
 through January 10.
 For more information,
 visit gibbesmuseum.org.*