

Being hit by a truck is a brutal wake-up call. But Chrissandra Neustaedter credits this with turning her life around.

She followed her dreams to success

BY CAROL AND MIKE MATTHEWS

WORKING AS A LEGAL secretary in Vancouver was well paid, if not particularly satisfying. Then Chrissandra Neustaedter was hit by a truck walking to work one morning and thrown some 10 metres.

"It was a wake-up call," she says, "that made me think differently about my life. It made me realize that it's important to follow your dreams."

When she had recovered from the head injuries and broken bones she suffered in the accident, her dreams took her to England and France to study music and art and, a few years ago, led her to move with her husband, Curt, to her new home and studio in Nanoose Bay. Over the past several years she's established herself as a very successful piano teacher, but is now focusing full-time on painting.

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Dan and Lana Hudon are excited about this artist. The Hudons exhibited Neustaedter's work last fall at Victoria's West End Gallery, and are featuring her again in their garden show this March.

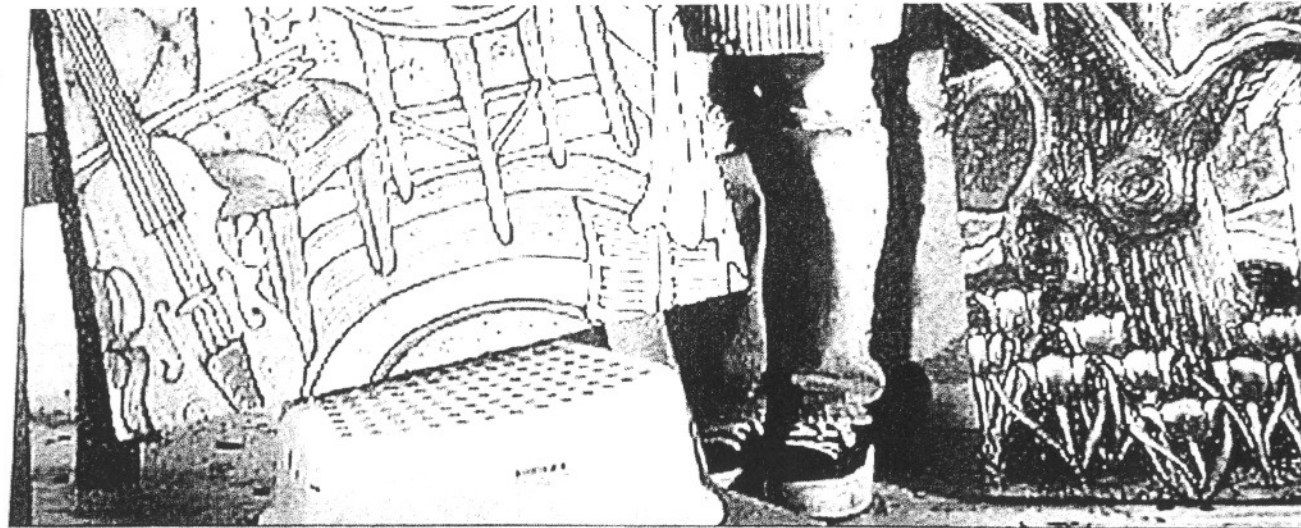
"Her work has a kind of whimsy which appeals to a range of purchasers," Lana says. "In both Edmonton and in Victoria, her sales are strong and growing, yet her prices are affordable — from \$175 for smaller pieces to \$1,800 for larger works."

Dana Hutchings, a reporter for CH news, is equally enthusiastic. After doing a story on Neustaedter, Hutchings bought one of her paintings. She keeps it in "the place of honour" right over the living-room fireplace of her Victoria home, and was moved to commission for her mother, an avid gardener, a Neustaedter painting of calla lilies.

"It's her style, her use of colour and textures, how she builds textures, that's the really exciting thing," says Hutchings. "She's not your typical West Coast painter. Her individuality was what attracted me."

Neustaedter's work finds a home in a variety of settings. In chilly Toronto, Paul St. John's walls are warmed by two Neustaedter oils. St. John owns 40 original art works, and says Neustaedter's have a special place in his home. "I felt they were perfect for the kitchen, and my decorator loved them."

These paintings speak to the house and garden, rather than the gallery. They often celebrate food, with small



Chrissandra Neustaedter is making a name for herself on the art gallery circuits.

Curt Neusta

pieces exalting a single pear, or bowls of fruit with wine-glasses on a garden table. A painting may be inspired by fall harvests, produce or preserves. The makings of a ratatouille might be laid out as a pictorial recipe.

With works varying from very small pieces that can fit into a kitchen corner to larger pieces of unusual shapes and sizes, Neustaedter creates a bright, sculpted texture almost like that of a woodcut.

"I work backwards," she says, "starting with a black background, then painting and finally sanding the piece so that the black outlines lend a carved appearance."

Neustaedter's studio in Nanoose Bay reflects the sunny energy, enthusiasm and personal attractiveness of the artist herself. Full of light and bustling with strong colours, her paintings reach for you with a swirling, strongly textured style. It's not surprising when she speaks of her admiration of the sculpted quality of Van Gogh's work.

Working with sand, modelling paste and beeswax, this artist has tried out a number of different approaches to painting. "I've learned a lot from experimentation," she says, noting that her current textured work results from early experiments mixing several other media with acrylics — and even with drywall compounds left over from home renovations. "Art materials can be pretty expensive, so I thought it was worth a try," she laughs.

At 36, Neustaedter has packed a lot of experimentation into her life and work, but also has a solid foundation in theory. She studied at Scottsdale Artist's Studio in Arizona and completed three years of study at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. A musician as well as an artist, she qualified for an ARCT from the Toronto Conservatory of Music and an ALCM from the London College of Music.

Although she has relinquished her musical career for the moment, Neustaedter often paints musical instruments — a piano in a background, a guitar leaning against a table. She sees a similarity in visual and musical composition. "There has to be a balance of subject, tone and colour," she says. "Both art and music must have appealing harmony, texture and depth."

"There's been a wonderful public response to her paintings," says Joan Murphy, executive director of the Nanaimo Art Gallery. "When she first came to the gallery, our downtown manager, Joel Prevost, told us this was an artist to be watched. Clearly, he was right!"

In the end, the accident in Vancouver may have been a lucky one for Neustaedter. The wake-up call has led her to realize her dream, and her brilliant career is taking off.

Carol and Mike Matthews live in Nanaimo.