

BY MILENA NIGAM

Shadyside artist
and psychotherapist

LAUREN STERN

lives and paints
in a many-hued,
kaleidoscope world.



Lauren Stern with her works as yoga mats (above) and bag (below).

L IN FULL COLOR

Lauren Stern loves color. In April, her front garden is in full bloom. Blue hyacinths. Red and yellow tulips. Purple porch chairs are set in a circle for a large group. She opens the door to her Shadyside house wearing a rich eggplant sweater and pink polka-dot socks.

"I love color!" she says, like a mantra, throughout an afternoon conversation.

Stern is a visual artist and a psychotherapist. These days, she conducts both lines of work from her compact kitchen. The easel is set up on the counter; markers, glue, and paper scraps fill the drawers. A few steps away is the kitchen table, where she conducts therapy sessions on her laptop.

The kitchen walls are painted a soft, cheerful lilac.

Stern has practiced psychotherapy for 42 years, most of that time focused on patients with eating disorders. Since the pandemic, she has seen her patients virtually. "Everyone loves the purple kitchen," she says. It's not lost on her that "I'm in a kitchen, listening to their stories about food."



But food rarely shows up in her art. Instead, her collages are as bright as her surroundings, with women in vibrant clothes, surrounded by words of wisdom and accompanied by tropical birds and other forms of nature.

The work in progress is a large canvas of vertical stripes. Reds, peach, deep pink. At the center is a single woman with large eyes and a serious mouth, her neck, ears, and head adorned in sparkly turquoise jewelry and a hat. Two long-haired dogs stand at the bottom wearing similarly sparkly collars. Stern demonstrates how she makes the elements pop. She finds a white pen in her drawer and colors over the dogs' fur, long lines accenting the thick shag.

On a typical day, Stern starts early, brewing cof-

fee and setting up a clean canvas. As the day progresses, she meets with patients. In between sessions, she'll add color to the canvas. Outline a woman's face in charcoal. Start to build her clothes by layering scraps of paper, always thinking about color. She might look through a catalog and cut out images of her favorite birds, or perhaps a zebra. Always moving from session to the canvas, capturing not a specific person, but the intensity of what her patients are working through.

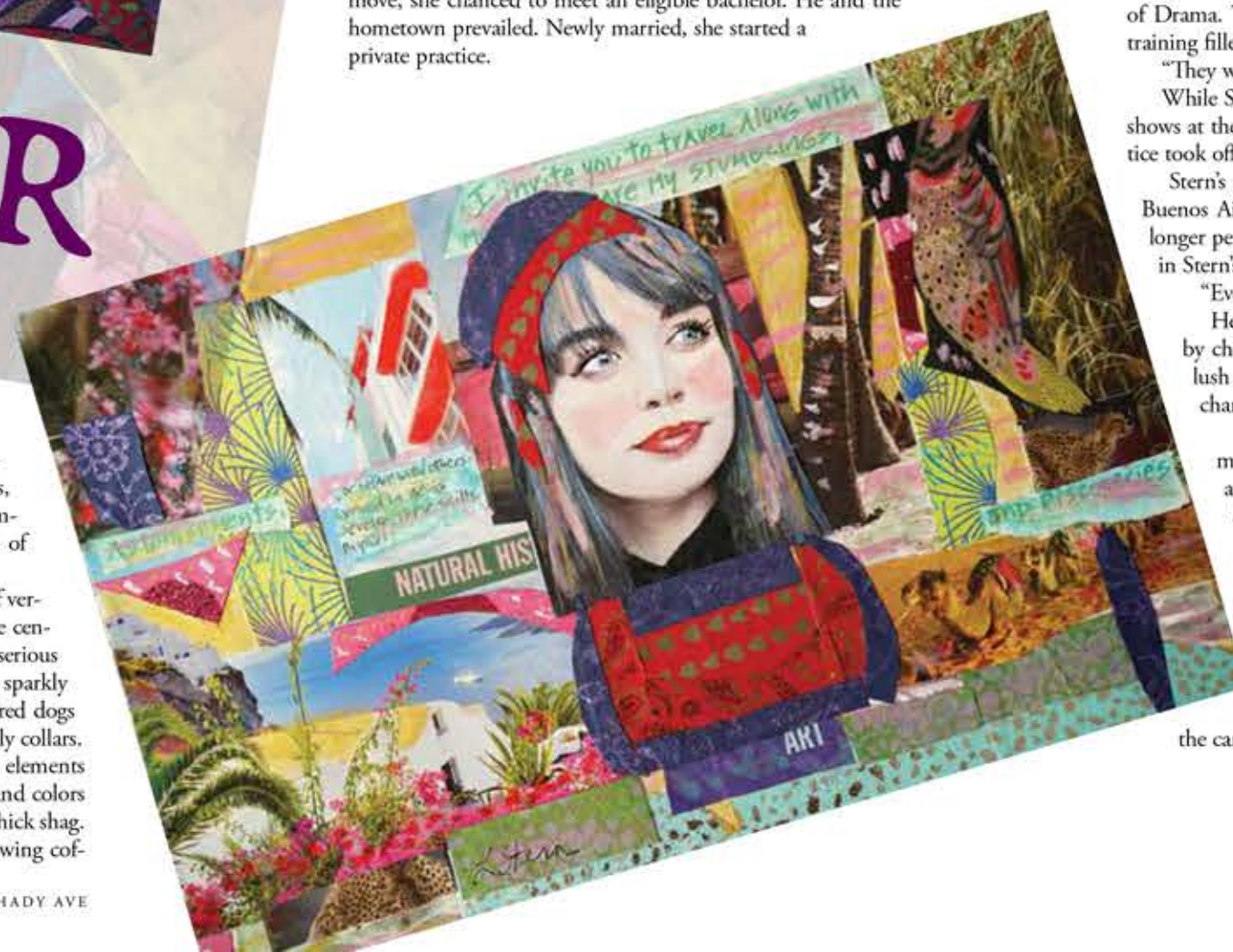
Stern keeps these women's journeys close as they work toward healing. "The covid scene was so hard. People were so alone. You couldn't date. It's hard, now, to let someone into your space," she says. "There's a lot of that issue right now."

As her piece takes shape — adding glitter, embellishing the clothing — the stories she's holding for her patients show through. In color. In the women's expressions. In the joy Stern gets in dressing her subjects. It comes from the heart, she says. Her artist statement declares: "My love of people and life has been my main focus."

Stern grew up in Squirrel Hill among a family of artists. Her mother played the piano at Mario Melodia's dance studio; her father danced with Gene Kelly. She attended Taylor Allderdice High School. After earning an undergraduate degree in special education, Stern completed a master's degree in art therapy. She spent a semester in London at the Hampstead Clinic, where she had the opportunity to take classes with Anna Freud.

She started her clinical work in Chicago, first with young boys, and then teens, and soon shifting her focus to girls. One of her earliest offices was a ceramics room, where she'd meet groups around a table for art therapy, the kiln actively firing clay pots in the corner.

After her marriage broke up, she decided to relocate with her young daughter to New York. But fate intervened. While staying in Pittsburgh before the move, she chanced to meet an eligible bachelor. He and the hometown prevailed. Newly married, she started a private practice.



Some of Stern's latest work.

Her practice led to workshops with students at Winchester Thurston and The Ellis School. She also worked with young women from Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama. The sessions were held at 7 in the morning because intensive theater training filled the rest of the students' day.

"They would come to me because I like the creativity," she says.

While Stern has practiced art therapy from the beginning, and had some early shows at the Jewish Community Center and in Point Breeze, her current art practice took off during the pandemic.

Stern's daughter is also an artist, an accomplished harpist with the opera in Buenos Aires. Stern and her husband bought a house there so they can spend longer periods with her. Photos of Argentinian graffiti now make an appearance in Stern's art.

"Everything tells stories," she says.

Her most recent series, smaller square pieces painted on wood, are inspired by characters in the latest season of HBO's "The White Lotus." Collages of lush tropical colors, monkeys, and more birds. Cuttings of recognizable characters played by actors Aimee Lou Wood and Natasha Rothwell.

She sells her art — including reproductions made into pillows, yoga mats, and totes — mainly online. This summer, she'll be selling original art and prints at the Shadyside Arts Festival, August 23-24 on Walnut Street.

Standing at her kitchen easel, she studies her work-in-progress. "I never know. I just never know how it will turn out. I know there will be a woman. Maybe two. Some sort of bird. A butterfly. When I'm sitting with [my patients] all day, the intensity — the mood of the sessions — encourages me to do whatever comes up. That's what's so magical about it."

She picks another scrap of paper, bright magenta. Holds it to the canvas. "And I love color."

Lauren Stern Fine Art: laurensternart.com

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