

Connecting *at the* Cape May Point Science Center Art and History

Text by Anne Walsh

Photographs by Jim Walsh



Saint Marys by the Sea by Brancato

“To view art, we must do more than simply look, we must see beyond, and make our own connections. Whether it is through the arts, or science, we must realize that everything is connected! We see this in music, science, and art. We see this in everything, really. Once we see that, we are better for it.”

SISTER HELEN DAVID BRANCATO, IHM



Portrait of Sister Helen



Cape May Point is home to the iconic white building with the red roof adorned with crosses and surrounding a peaceful courtyard.

This place holds a rich and complex history, starting out as a seaside escape in the late 19th century called the Shoreham Hotel, yet it has been a mystery to many. Unless you were a Sister of Saint Joseph (SSJ), or an attendee at one of their spiritual retreats, you probably have only admired this building from the outside. The course of its history changed yet again when the SSJ sold Saint Mary's by-the-Sea Retreat Center, entrusting it to become the Cape May Point Science Center (CMPSC). Visitors can now tour the building in season, and, in 2024 there will be something new to see inside these walls. Science Center President, Bob Mullock, wanted a way to maintain a connection to the religious history of the building. He found that connection through an artist and her art.

This is the story of that remarkable artist and how her work came to be part of the Science Center. It's a story about connection, and how I played a part in facilitating that connection.

Last fall, the Science Center was the venue for a fundraiser benefiting the Cape May Community Food Closet. Assisting with acquiring art auction items for this event, I reached out

to a friend who is an art teacher, printmaker, illustrator, and painter. She is also a nun. Sister Helen David Brancato, Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), whose work carries themes of justice, peace, and homelessness, generously agreed to donate a piece for this important charity as it directly aligned with her artistic themes. Additionally, the venue for the fundraiser held special memories for her. At past retreats here, she was invited by the SSJ to teach and create. She donated a fine art print for the auction, one of her personal favorites, titled *The Quilting Party*. At the auction, a bidding war on the print resulted in an impressive monetary donation to the charity.

Around this time, I had a conversation with Bob Mullock about Sister Helen. Bob cleared his calendar the next day and made the long drive to meet her. Sister Helen's studio, Gatehouse Gallery, is at the entrance to Saint Aloysius Academy in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. What could I have told Bob Mullock that piqued his interest? I shared the story of the time I attended a spiritual art retreat at Saint Mary's by-the-Sea, and about the friend I made there.

Back in 2013, I arrived at the retreat with my paints, brushes, canvases, and other supplies to create a pedestal for the Blessed Mother statuette in my garden. Upon entering, I realized that

ABOVE: *The Confession Series* triptych, a new addition to Cape May Point Science Center

RIGHT: Brancato painting in her studio

most attendees knew each other from previous annual retreats, and I felt a little out of place, especially at mealtime. I took my food tray and found an empty table by a window, with a view of the Blessed Mother statue in the courtyard. Before long, I was joined by Sister Helen, who was there to teach a workshop. At each meal throughout the weekend, she sat with me, and we connected. As Sister Helen recalls, "The atmosphere at the retreat was warm, inclusive, and enriching. I loved the experience of talking with people of different backgrounds. I loved the diversity of the people who came to that retreat, hungry for the arts. They all responded, and saw beyond art, making the important connections between art, life, and nature."

During each meal we shared, we had deep conversations. I learned a lot from and about Sister Helen. To my surprise, we had plenty in common. I learned that she was from the IHM teaching order, which taught me throughout my

education. When we met, she resided in the religious housing at my old high school. I also learned that we both were Phillies fans. She smiled as she recalled growing up as the daughter of a major league shortstop/third baseman, Al Brancato, who played for the Philadelphia Athletics.

We were also both teachers. At the time of my retreat, she had been teaching art at Villanova University since 2004 (she retired in 2020, during the pandemic). However, unlike me, she had been a teacher for her entire career, at various assigned locations. She told me about some of the classes and workshops she taught around the country, on spirituality, art, creativity, and compassion. She quoted Picasso, "It takes a very long time to become young," noting that "Picasso painted his best works in his later years with a childlike abandon."

Throughout the retreat, I noticed that the SSJ nuns held Sister Helen in high regard, almost like a celebrity. It wasn't

until later that weekend that I realized how fascinating, even radical her art was. I attended her workshop, even though I was signed up for a different one. The mischievous Catholic school girl in me snuck out of my assigned workshop and into Sister Helen's. It was called "Making Your Spirit Visible."

In the workshop, Sister used special tools to create an intuitive piece of artwork: watercolor paper, water, Indian ink, bamboo brushes—and music. "There is a freedom I feel from music. It evokes passion, deep emotions, and allows you to let go and respond to it." She cued her personal boombox, and we listened for a while before she began her demonstration. Sister dipped a bamboo paintbrush into a jar of water and applied clear strokes of water randomly on the paper, without thought or intended effect. She then dipped the brush in dark Indian ink, in the same manner, using random strokes, guided by the music. We students moved in close and



observed with great curiosity as the ink began to move on its own through the water, traveling in fractals and swirls along the wet and dry portions of the paper.

We watched this painting paint itself.

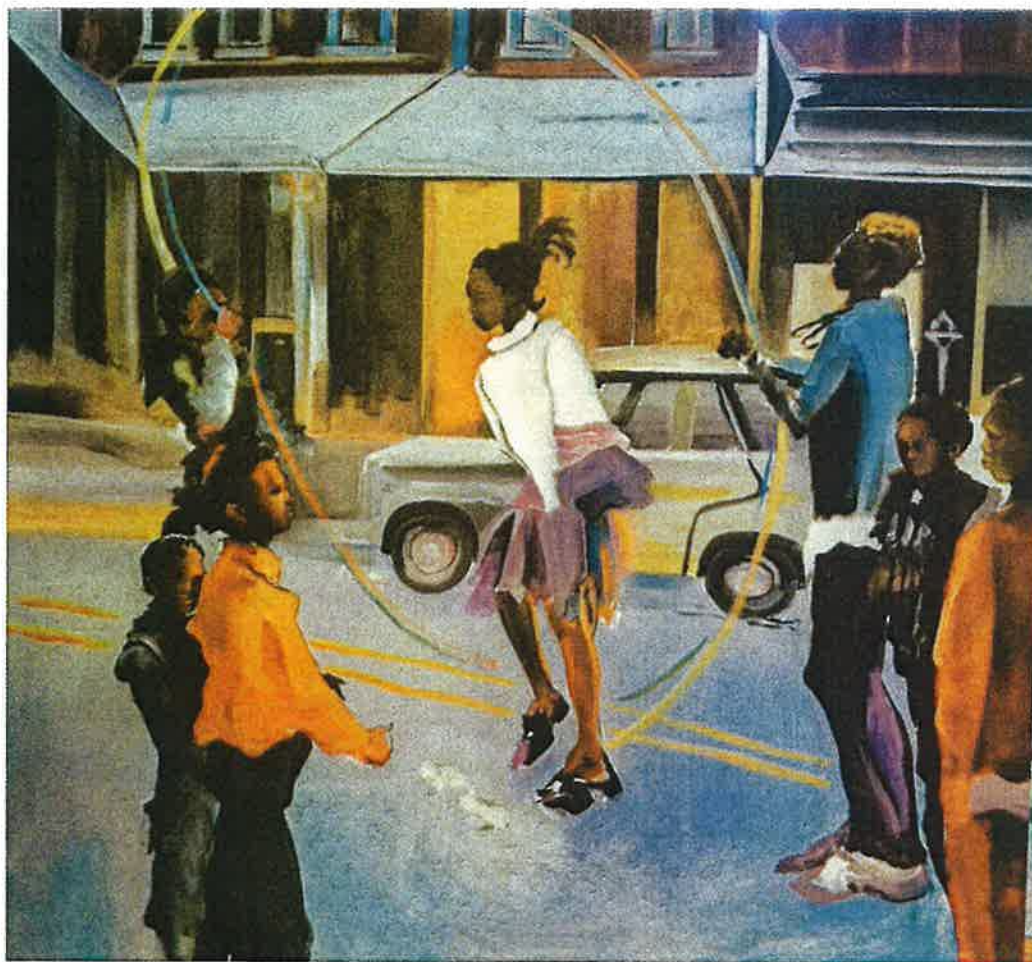
Sister compared it to the way we interpret images in clouds. The liquid movement on the paper finally settled. We stared at the piece, as she instructed, looking for images in the "clouds" of water and ink. Sister turned the painting upside down, then on its side, and at once, we all saw it. I remember hearing audible gasps. It was breathtaking. The image that emerged was a distinct detailed image of Christ on the cross.

Even Sister Helen was surprised and visibly moved. We all knew we'd just witnessed something uniquely and spiritually artistic. For the rest of the workshop, we tried our own hands at this method, finding a variety of images in this mysterious, meditative, and musical process. Over the years since, I've seen many of her works using this method, including a book she

illustrated, a collaboration with religious and social activist Evelyn Mattern, titled *Why Not Become Fire? Encounters with Women Mystics*.

At the end of the retreat, everyone crowded around Sister Helen to say their goodbyes. Attendees lined up to speak with her. As the crowd dispersed, she approached me and asked me to join her for lunch before she returned to Pennsylvania. I invited her to eat at my nearby house. When we arrived, she helped me place my Blessed Mother garden statue on the new pedestal I'd made. We shared our last meal of the weekend together, one last deep conversation, and promised to stay in touch.

As time passed, I continued to learn from my teacher and friend. Sister Helen feels very strongly that women in religious life must be recognized. This is illustrated in one of her well-known paintings, *It Was the Women Who Stayed*. Inspired by this painting, in an article in *The National Catholic Reporter*, Sister Christine Schenk, SSJ, wrote, "Female disciples [of Jesus] are all but invisible to most Christians."



LEFT: *Double Dutch on 46th Street*

OPPOSITE: Brancato with her favorite piece

This painting portrays a scene when Jesus had been abandoned by everyone except for the women who stuck by him. Sister Helen explained that it was important to her to represent women of all ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities in this painting.

Sister Helen also speaks often of her life-changing travels in 1989 to Haiti with a religious activist from Philadelphia, Sister Joan Chittister, on a tour with Pax Christi Catholic Peace Movement. Joan Chittister, Prioress of the Benedictine Sisters and leader of Pax Christi, planned this trip with the mission to raise awareness of the suffering of the Haitian people. She assembled a group of writers, artists, foresters, and more, whose mission was to return to the U.S. and share what they witnessed. For Sister Helen, the trip resulted in a series of approximately 50 paintings that started as sketches she created from her observations. These paintings were eventually displayed at the Temple University Science Center.

Sister Helen says that her work is bound up with the human condition. "I respond to nature peacefully, and to human nature with healthy agitation." From 1990 to 2004, she was the director at Southwest Community Enrichment Center in one of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods. She came with the philosophy that people are "just as hungry for the arts as they are for bread and that we are all teachers to each other." This was one of the most transformative experiences in her life. "Through painting, I try to bring the depth of my insight into the pain, the strength, and the dignity of my subjects," she said. One of my personal favorites of Sister Helen's work, titled *Double Dutch on 46th Street*, comes from this period.

Asked about her favorite painting, she said the five-foot symbol-filled portrait of Frida Kahlo titled *The Two Accidents in My Life*. "In this painting, Frida has a 'third eye' which means, as a painter, she has insight into people, into her own



roots, into the land. She paints with such emotion, expressing what is deepest inside of her. She sees that everything is connected and has meaning."

I learned that Sister Helen is versatile and prolific. She physically, emotionally, and spiritually needs to paint, and when life prevents it, she craves it. Her body of work became so large that she enlisted the skills of Jim Walsh, photographer for this article, to digitally document and catalog hundreds of her paintings. She had nowhere to keep them—and the IHM community didn't want to see her art stored away. After over 50 years of teaching art and painting, Sister Helen never had her own studio, instead either painting her scenes and subjects on site, or sketching them and then using the studio at whichever school she was teaching at the time.

That changed in 2016. Recognizing the need for a special space for this exceptional art, the IHM community made it available for people to see and to support the importance of art as a means for teaching.

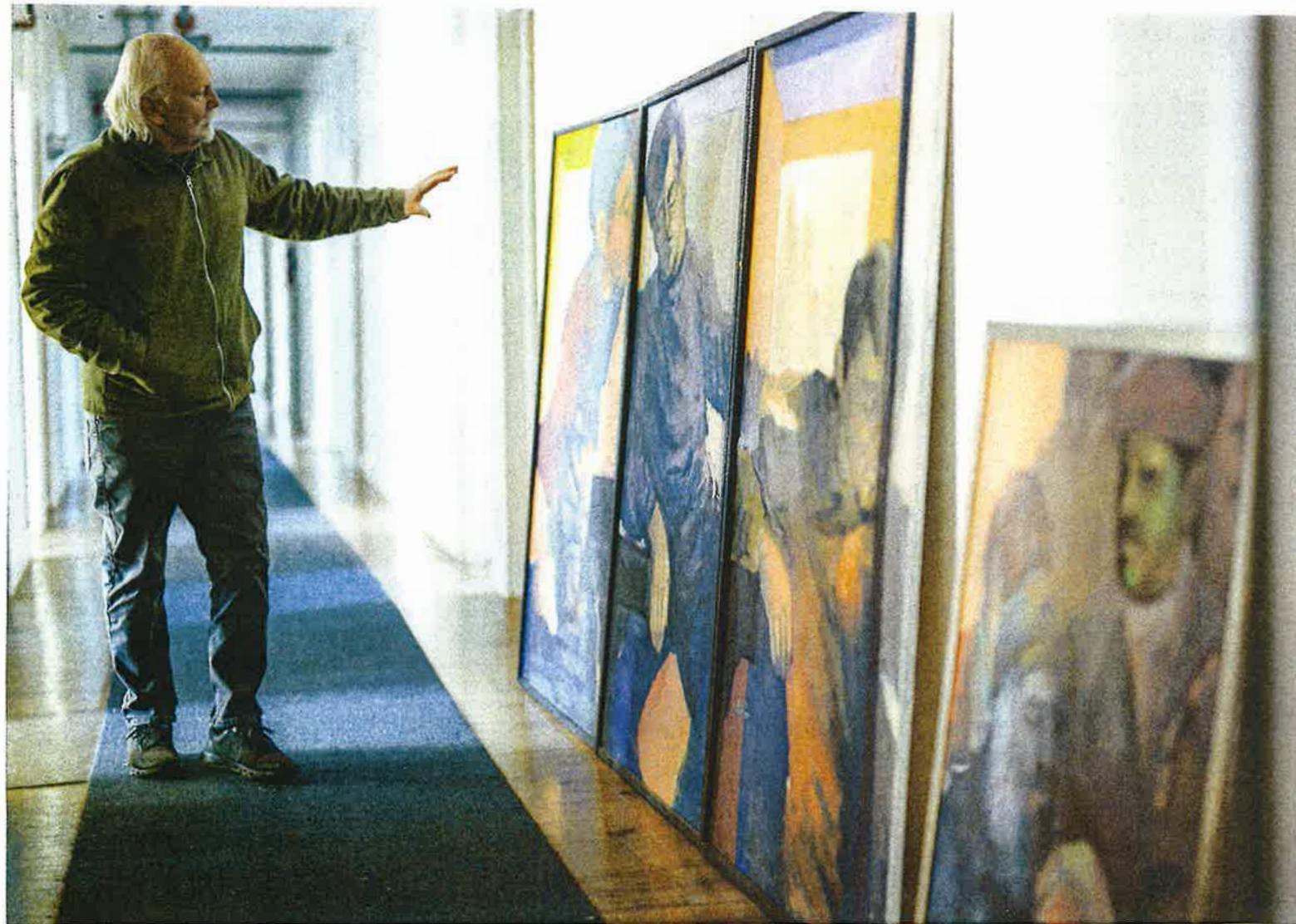
At the IHM convent house at Saint Aloysius Academy, Sister Helen was offered her own studio and gallery space. The grounds of the Academy hold a fascinating history closely linked with Drexel University; originally known as the Wootten Mansion, it was visited

often by Saint Katherine Drexel. The property is now a school, convent residence, and IHM conference center. Its formal gatehouse is now Gatehouse Gallery, where people can meet the artist and view her work. Sister Helen's open studio art sales support IHM literacy centers and outreach ministries sponsored by the IHM community.

When Bob Mullock was inspired to meet Sister Helen, I arranged for it at Gatehouse Gallery. "When you told me about her, I really wanted to go meet her because I believe it is important to keep the history of the religious life in this building, and she was a part of that." During his time at her studio, she showed him all her art. Bob said that she was looking forward to selling some pieces, and felt her desire to have some works preserved in a place important to her. "We really hit it off. She is such a wonderful person. She has an aura about her."

Sister Helen said, "I had the nicest talk with him. He was so interested and down-to-earth. He went through every corner of the gatehouse, asking questions all the while. He was a man I felt very comfortable with."

They talked a lot about art that day, and how artists have meaning attached to their works, yet, once a painting is viewed by another, a different meaning can be derived based on the viewer's



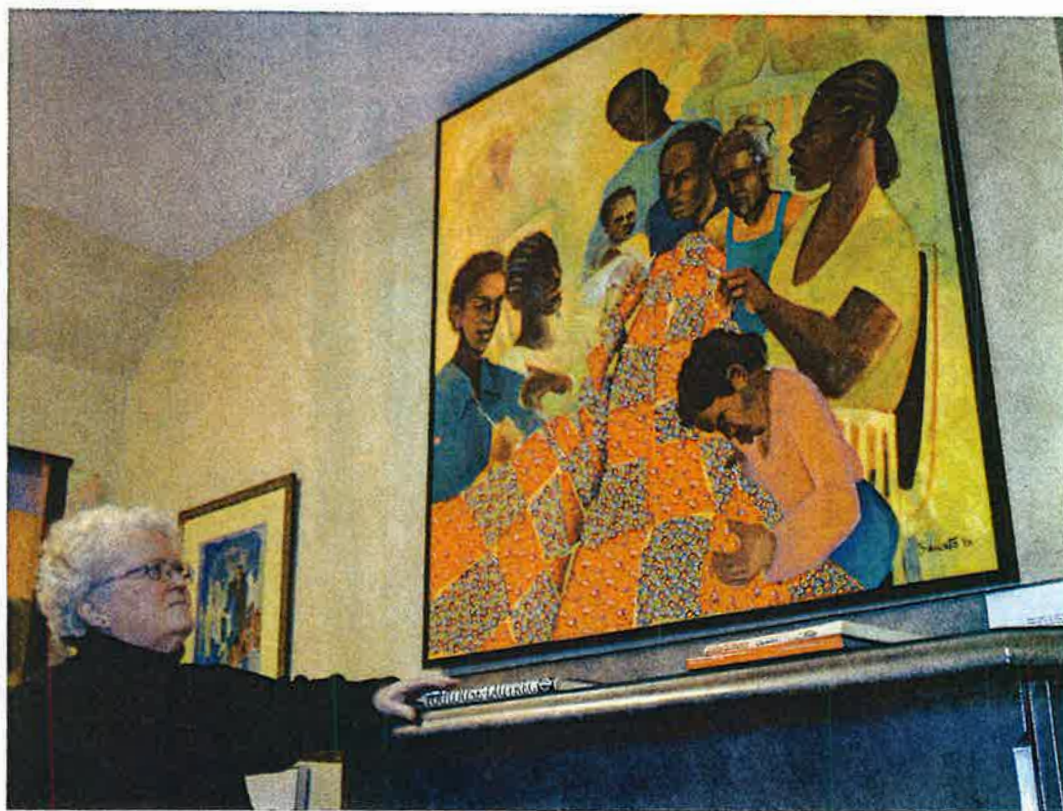
perspective and life experiences. "Her artwork was such a great pleasure to see," Mullock said. "It's diverse, with a range of methods: painting, charcoal, oil, watercolor, and more. As we looked at it, she would ask how each piece made me feel."

One painting drew Bob in. "I immediately fell for her work titled *The Confession Series*. She did not tell me the title, or what it meant to her. She asked how it made me feel, and I told her 'Peace be with You.'" This triptych is a large, three-paneled series. "It portrays a priest in a confessional in the center piece, and on either side, people who seem in a state of unrest who are comforted by the figure in the center." Sister Helen described the painting as a self-portrait: herself as the priest, with two younger versions of herself on either side, and one figure breaking out of the box. Mullock acquired the series and will display it in a prominent spot at the Science Center, on a large wall at the top of the stairs, "...so that everyone who passes down those steps will have a chance to see and feel something from this series." Sister told Bob that it would be interest-

ing to "let visitors translate their own meaning from this particular piece." He agreed.

Another piece acquired for the Science Center is a watercolor, using a similar process to the Indian ink method. "During the painting process, during that flow, I felt like I was being guided," as she often does, Sister explained. When she completed this piece, she was surprised by the figure that emerged. The piece is titled *Harriett Tubman*. Mullock sees the story of the woman at the well, from the New Testament (John 4:5-30). "Sister Helen's work has such great depth to it, and I hope that people who see it allow themselves to feel the freedom to say how it strikes them. To me, the most notable quality of her work is that it's so striking."

Most artists have a particular style that defines their work. When asked about her style of painting, Sister laughed. "I don't know if I have a style! I just identify with the people I paint. I put myself into the landscapes. I become one with my subjects and put my emotion into everything I paint. I make myself very vulnerable in that way."



FROM LEFT: Bob Mullock with his favorite Brancato painting. Sister Helen Brancato in her studio with *Quilting Party*

The Science Center has a primary focus on nature, yet it is Mullock's intention to hold onto the sanctity of the building as much as possible because "God has blessed us so much in this building, and we want to share that with the community and let people get a feel for the love and the belief in God that has been here. Imagine all the prayers, from the Sisters of Saint Joseph, the soldiers escaping the Nazis in the Atlantic Ocean just outside here, the escaped slaves who made their way across the bay to freedom. They all had their own prayers here, in and around this space."

Having her work on permanent display at the center, Sister says, "...is an honor. I think there is something sacred in that building because of the people who have passed through it. My memories are all good ones of my time there. People have left their spirit in that building and I always felt that warmth and con-

nection when I entered that sacred space. I know that Bob Mullock's intentions for the Science Center are pure and good. I saw that in him the day he visited."

"You feel like her experiences in her life were reflected very much in her work," Mullock said. "I felt very emotionally connected with her. There is a purity about her. I felt like I was in a holy place in her studio."

Sister Helen has an open invitation to reconnect with one of her favorite places. "I'm hoping to see her visit someday. I invited her back. Sister said she would love to come and paint here, and she is welcome to, with no restrictions, so we pray that one day she'll come to paint here again." Sister Helen wants to return. "It's best to paint from life, especially in Cape May. I'll do my best to keep my promise to return." Such a visit would keep the connection open between spirituality and science, via the singular beauty of art. ■



Gatehouse Gallery - Sister Helen's studio is located at the entrance of Saint Aloysius Academy, 401 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. It is open to the public, who can view her works and meet her. Hours are by appointment only. Call 484-383-3599, or visit gatehousegallery.org