

Norris Mailer, Out of Arkansas

The Author's Sixth Wife, Her Art and Her Roots

By Stephanie Mansfield
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Norris Church Mailer, Norman Mailer's sixth and current wife, was a high school art teacher when she fell in love with the irascible author and decided to follow him to New York. There were no conditions. No promises. Norman had only one caveat. "Don't bring any of your Arkansas polyester clothes."

That was a decade ago, and now Mailer—whose oil paintings sell for up to \$8,000 and grace the walls of celebrities like Cybill Shepherd, Milos Foreman, Patricia Ken-

nedy Lawford, Roy Cohn and Kurt Vonnegut—is one of the best-dressed, best-connected artists in America, smelling more of Chanel No. 5 than Varsol.

On the eve of her first one-woman Washington show at the Wallace Wentworth Gallery (which will run through Feb. 8), the statuesque redhead wears a paisley skirt, gray suede boots, a purple braided jacket and a gaggle of chunky gold jewelry. Her makeup is expertly applied, if a mite overdone—a holdover, perhaps, from her modeling career or her stint as a soap actress on "All My Children." Slightly apprehensive as

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Mailer

MAILER, From D1

she eyes her paintings in the empty gallery, she talks about her career and her marriage to Stormin' Norman.

She is, at 36, a long way from Atkins, Ark. (pop. 1,200), where her mother ran the local beauty shop and her grandparents were sharecroppers. But the harsh, almost unforgiving plainness of the rural palette still defines her art. Like vintage, oversized snapshots from The Kodak Zone, her subjects mock the very happiness they are straining to portray. They are painfully ordinary, extraordinary in their pain.

"People have said on the surface they seem to be sentimental, but there's something diabolical lurking underneath them."

With their frozen smiles and posed affections, her subjects are instantly suspect. As Mailer says, "No one is completely that happy."

Yes, she agrees, being married to a famous writer has given her a certain

status, a certain entree she would not have gotten otherwise.

"When people see my work, they're surprised it's good," she says. "I think they're also surprised at the kind of work I do, because we usually think of women like me as being sort of abstract. Soft. Out of focus. It's strong work, I guess. It's from strong people. That's my heritage."

Norman Mailer, she says, has been extremely supportive of her career. She is visibly upset over the recent flap at the PEN literary congress in New York, headed by her husband. When a group of female authors protested that there were not enough women on the panels, Norman replied that there were not enough women intellectuals. A storm of protest ensued.

"He's not a chauvinist," Norris says. "He's the most wonderful man in the world"—five ex-wives ("I'm good friends with some of them") and all.

Norman does most of the cooking, for one thing, and helps take care of nine children and two houses (a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights and a summer place in Provincetown, Mass.). "He does more than I do," says his wife. "None of these things that people think about him are true at all. He really worked to get women

on this thing. He invited 14 women who said no."

Norris Church Mailer may not meet Donald Regan's demanding intellectual standards (she looks bewildered at the mere mention of throw-weights), but she does project a soft-spoken southern gentility and straightforward intelligence.

"I always felt that I was a woman in my own right. I started off that way as a child. None of us had any money, so we all took jobs to put ourselves through school. You made your own life. You didn't depend on anybody to do it for you."

So when the Famous Author was visiting a friend in Russellville, Ark., back in 1975, Norris got herself invited to a cocktail party to meet him. Divorced, with a small son, she later sent Norman a note with several pictures of herself. The author phoned her and returned to Arkansas; the couple spent three days at the Sheraton in Little Rock.

Norman was still married to his fifth wife, Carol Stevens, at the time. Norris moved to New York and Norman left Stevens. It was six years before the two could marry, and in the meantime, she gave birth to the couple's only child, John Buffalo Mailer, now 7.

During those years, Mailer, who once sketched Ozark Mountain children in graphite pencil at art fairs, began accepting portrait commissions from some of Manhattan's toniest socialites.

She finds it particularly difficult to paint beautiful women—and indeed, her self-portraits are particularly unglamorous. One shows her as a gawky teen-ager in hair rollers and thick glasses, although she was named Miss Little Rock at the age of 3.

"I never got to be a cheerleader," she laughs. "It's the one thing that killed me all through high school. I wanted to be a cheerleader so much, but I was too uncoordinated. I couldn't get off the ground. They wanted me to play basketball, but I couldn't run across the court. I was nearsighted. When I took my glasses off, the whole basketball court disappeared."

Because her mother ran the beauty salon, she says—the shop was in the house, on the first floor—she never had a chance to let her hair grow; her mother was constantly experimenting on her with different cuts and frizzy permanents. "I was practically bald until I was 13, she kept cutting my hair. It was embarrassing. I used to be so ashamed to go to school."

She married young, had a baby and put her husband through school working as a secretary. "I ultimately got fired because I wouldn't go to bed with the boss. That was before you could do anything about it. I worked for the magnificent sum of \$50 week."

Her strict Baptist family, of course was "devastated" when she ran off with Norman. "What a horrible thing to have happen to your daughter. But, she sighs, "I was in love."

It was particularly difficult for the folks back home when the Mailer made the news. "It seemed like for years I would call them up and say 'Now, I wanted to tell you this before you read it in the newspaper . . .'"

In New York, she says, she never felt like an outsider. She began painting seriously several years ago, sharing a studio with Edith Vonnegut daughter of Kurt Vonnegut. She had her first show at Central Falls Gallery in New York in 1981, and since then has participated in several group shows on the East Coast.

But Mailer goes back to Arkansas on a regular basis. For inspiration.

"I've come far away," she says. "don't think it's necessarily upward mobility. It's just different."