

entertainment

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▲ **Being Somebody,** at Weilworks Gallery

**Sweetrocket on the wall**  
Shows with work by Riva Sweetrocket include:

**On view now**  
 ■ Foothills Art Center, 809 Fifteenth St., Golden: "REALationships: Works of Surreal Inspiration," with artists including Jack Balas and Wes Hempel, Jenny Morgan and Frank Sampson, through March 11. Artist talks 11 a.m. Saturday by Bill Amundson and Wes Magyar, and 11 a.m. Feb. 24 by Peter Illig and Riva Sweetrocket; 303-279-3922.  
 ■ Weilworks Gallery, 3611 Chestnut Place: "Colleagues," with artists including Tracy Weil, Lee Lee, Sharon Brown and Jimmy Sellars, through March 2; 303-308-9345.

**In the future**  
 ■ Boulder Public Library, 1000 Canyon Blvd., Boulder: July 2007; 303-441-3100.  
 ■ + Gallery, 2350 Lawrence St.: Undetermined date in 2008; 303-296-0927



▶ **Girls Just Wanna Sistine Ceiling Remix,** at Foothills Art Center

# Pastels with a purpose

'I like strange,' artist Sweetrocket says of her storytelling works

By Mary Voelz Chandler  
ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Say the word "pastel," and people tend to think of a soft color, a spectrum of pale blues, pinks and yellows that work well with baby clothes and sugary greeting cards.

But in the world of art, the word refers to a chalky stick, and when it is in the hands of Riva Sweetrocket, there is nothing particularly soft or sugary about it.

"I picked up a box of pastels at a yard sale and started using them," said Sweetrocket, whose large-scale, bold paintings are on view now in two exhibitions. "I fell in love with the color. You don't have to use any additional medium. You pick it up and you are rolling. The colors are so dramatic, they drew me in."

And they draw in viewers, in works that tend to include surreal situations and subjects caught in mysterious moments: three women, for instance, in poses that indicate varying states of acceptance; a dog hanging from one leg and stretching toward an orchid, while another dog sits nearby; or a giant rose sharing space with two dice and a pair of giraffes, its petals appearing as seductive as velvet in a mix of near photo-realistic renderings and seductive surfaces.

If that seems contradictory, it's not. Disparate messages — and metaphor are something Sweetrocket feels right at home with. "I try to do something different for each piece, to tell a story about something."

For instance the work *Being Somebody*, which is now in a show at Weilworks Gallery, involves two dogs, including that one hanging by one leg.

"It's about trying to be accepted in the eyes of your peers and the world, about having to change," Sweetrocket said. "The dog in front is the opposite of that. He's being himself, being natural. The other dog hanging by his foot reaching for the orchid and wearing the horse's mask, he's very uncomfortable. I try to just say something with my work. A lot of time it has a spiritual component, or a truth about life that I've arrived at. My work is not about looking beautiful, but about some sort of story."

In short, "I like strange." That is where her background comes in handy. Sweetrocket has a degree in psychology from the University of Colorado, where she took art classes. Her family moved to Boulder from Oregon when she was 2 (she was born in 1969). Her mother was a professor in the English department at the University of Colorado, her father an architect.

"I am nowhere near having a BFA (bachelor of fine arts degree). I dabbled in the CU art department. My Dad steered me into psychology. He thought that art was more like a hobby."

After seven years of working as an independent graphic artist, with art as a secondary pursuit, she now is able to devote herself full



MARC PISCOTTY/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

**Riva Sweetrocket** creates pastel works at her home studio, using a stepladder to reach the top of a piece.

time to her work. "I just closed (the graphic arts firm), so I can paint full time."

Her background in graphics software helps her work out a composition. "It's easier than sketching."

And, here, size does count. "I feel more engaged working at a larger size," she said. "It's like walking into a piece, being part of the scene. I want other people to feel that, too."

Sweetrocket's studio is a room in the four-level home she shares with husband Rohan Weerasinghe. She uses a stepladder to reach the top corners of a piece.

Home is conveniently about two blocks from the space that recently began to represent her, + Gallery.

"Riva absolutely has imagery that is really compelling," said gallery owner

Ivar Zeile, who will present a solo show of her work in 2008. "It's not something you can take a glance at and say, 'Oh, I get it.'"

The large scale is a plus, he said. "As she has expanded in scale, it has become even more powerful."

That holds for a piece Sweetrocket made for the show "REALationships: Works of Surreal Inspiration" at Foothills Art Center. The admitted fan of Cyndi Lauper - and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel - combined the two in a diptych (*Girls Just Wanna Sistine Ceiling Remix*) that puts a feminist spin on the intrusion of human elements into a celestial space.

"She is working into a style using grayscale with vibrant color," said Foothills curator Michael Chavez. "Her style is coming into its own, and her

metaphors are coming into their own."

Sweetrocket says that someday she would like to figure out a way to fix the pastel on paper so a work does not require glass.

"I spray with fixative before I frame it, but it's still very fragile," she said. "If you touch it, it smears."

But turning to more hardy paint is not a huge lure.

"I would like to learn how to paint, but I love the immediacy of not having a brush. It's almost a metaphor for my life. Kind of delicate, and has to be kept under glass."

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**Sweet rocket** (also known as dame's rocket) is a wildflower that produces night-scented flowers which attract moths and butterflies.

**Name that fits**

**Sweet rocket** is a plant with spiky purple or white flowers that exude a fragrance at night.

It also is the name **Riva Sweetrocket** chose when she was 20.

"It's a wildflower, almost like a weed," the 37-year-old artist said recently. "I like the word because it has two parts, and that pretty much covers my spectrum."

Her last name had been **Thompson**, but she changed it legally. "I always knew I would change it. I thought it never really described me."