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HAWAI'I

CURATED TRAVEL + LIFESTYLE

Contents

54 **Art + Time**
Artist Mary Spears harnesses the healing power of her craft.

Mary's artwork is available through Tiffany's Art Agency in Hawi, the Gallery of Great Things in Waimea, and her website www.maryspears.com

Mosaics are available through private commissions. If you're interested in learning more about the Italian glass mosaics, contact Mary at (808) 987-0357 for a studio tour.

Watercolor trips to Italy happen every October. The 2025 trip information will be available in September 2024 on the website under Happenings and Classes. Additional information is also at Andrew Lyon Travel, www.Andrewwlyon.com/Trips

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ART + *TIME*

Artist Mary Spears harnesses the healing power of her craft

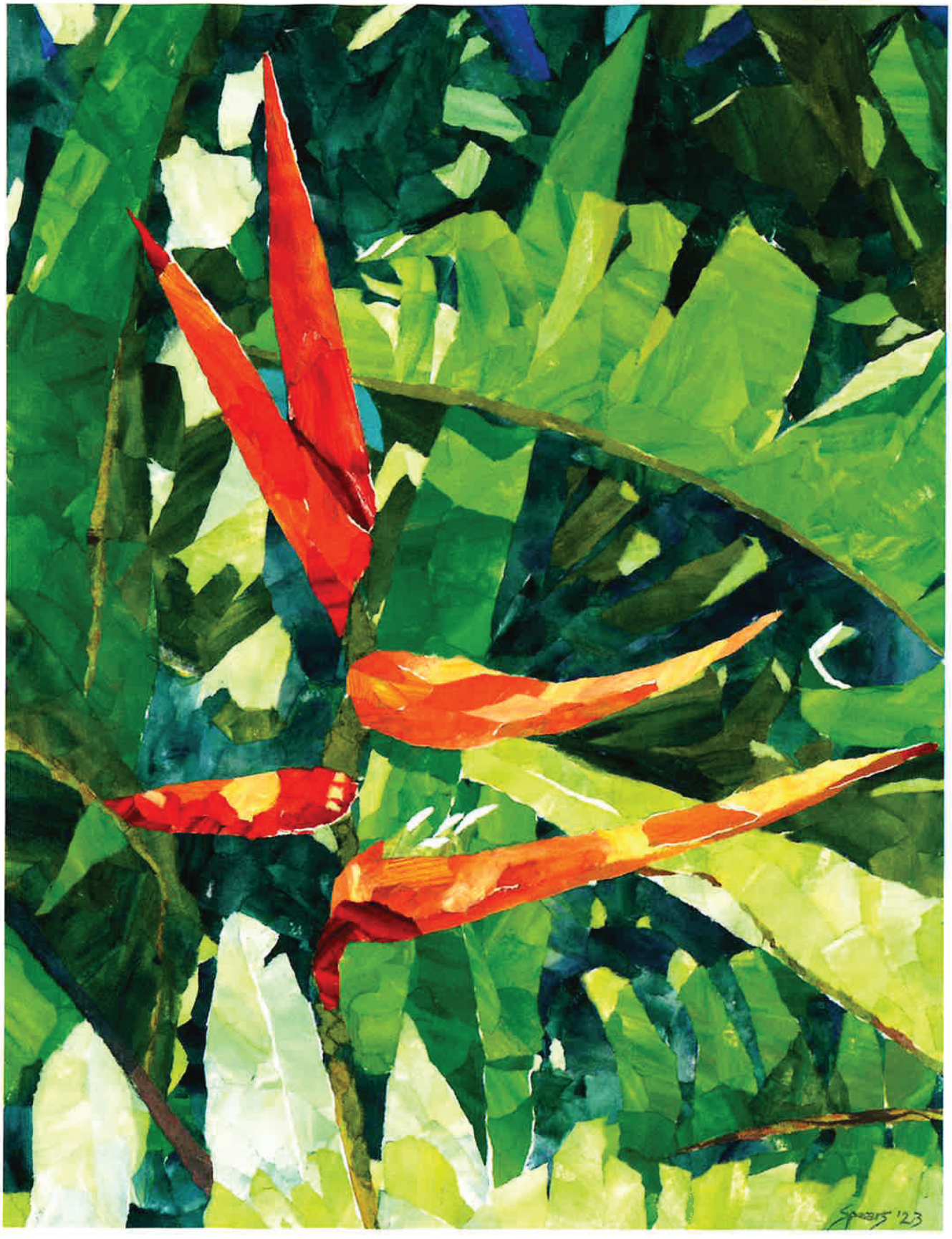
story **SARA STOVER**

Bits of paper painted vibrant colors, torn into various shapes and sizes, and layered for texture harmonize to form a hanging pink heliconia. "It's one of the most magical things in the world—to start with a blank canvas and end up with a beautiful, painted paper collage," says artist Mary Spears of her creative process. "You have to be ready to let the art go where it needs to go, and every time you allow it to take its course, something exciting happens!"

From her hibiscus-fringed studio in the heart of Waimea, Hawai'i, Mary creates watercolors, oils on canvas, mosaics and murals that reflect her joyful nature. Her artistic journey, however, didn't begin with a positive experience taking an art class or visiting a gallery. It was a sudden and debilitating accident that catalyzed her creativity.

In 1989, Mary and her husband, Phil Slott, arrived on Hawai'i Island for a sabbatical. After exploring Mana Road on their first day, they soon fell in love with the island. Mary and Phil's year-long break from their responsibilities at the prominent advertising agency they worked for became a permanent move to Hawai'i. The couple immersed themselves in biking, running, surfing, swimming, and enjoying the island lifestyle for the next four years.

"Then, one morning in 1993, Phil was riding his motorcycle to the gym when he was run over by a drunk driver in a pickup truck," Mary recalls. With broken bones, damaged organs and a traumatic brain injury, Phil fought to stay alive ... and won. After being released from the ICU, however, he faced years of rehabilitation that included learning how to read again.



Confined to the living room with a severe brain injury, Phil had little motivation to learn to read. Then, based on a friend's recommendation, Mary suggested that Phil read aloud the poems of Robert Service, a World War I trench poet known as "the bard of the Yukon." He eventually and reluctantly conceded, but only if Mary agreed to learn something new and challenging for her. After some time, Phil began reading three brief poems daily, and Mary created three paintings daily.

"The great gift of this process was there were no performance expectations. This was not about picking up a brush and becoming the next Michelangelo, which gave me the freedom to play! To ask, 'What happens when I add this color or more water?' I learned the technical part in the playing," Mary explains.

One year after the first poem and painting, Phil finished reading the entire collected works of Robert Service, experiencing the healing properties of poetry. Mary painted over 1,200 watercolors, discovering the joy of creating an image from a blank canvas and an original idea. It wasn't long before others, including artist Christy Henspetter, discovered Mary›s talent.

"I was introduced to Christy through a mutual friend when they visited Hawai'i. After flipping through my watercolors, she said some were quite good," Mary reminisces. By 1997, Mary opened the show "Fish & Flowers" with Christy at the Gallery of Great Things in Waimea.

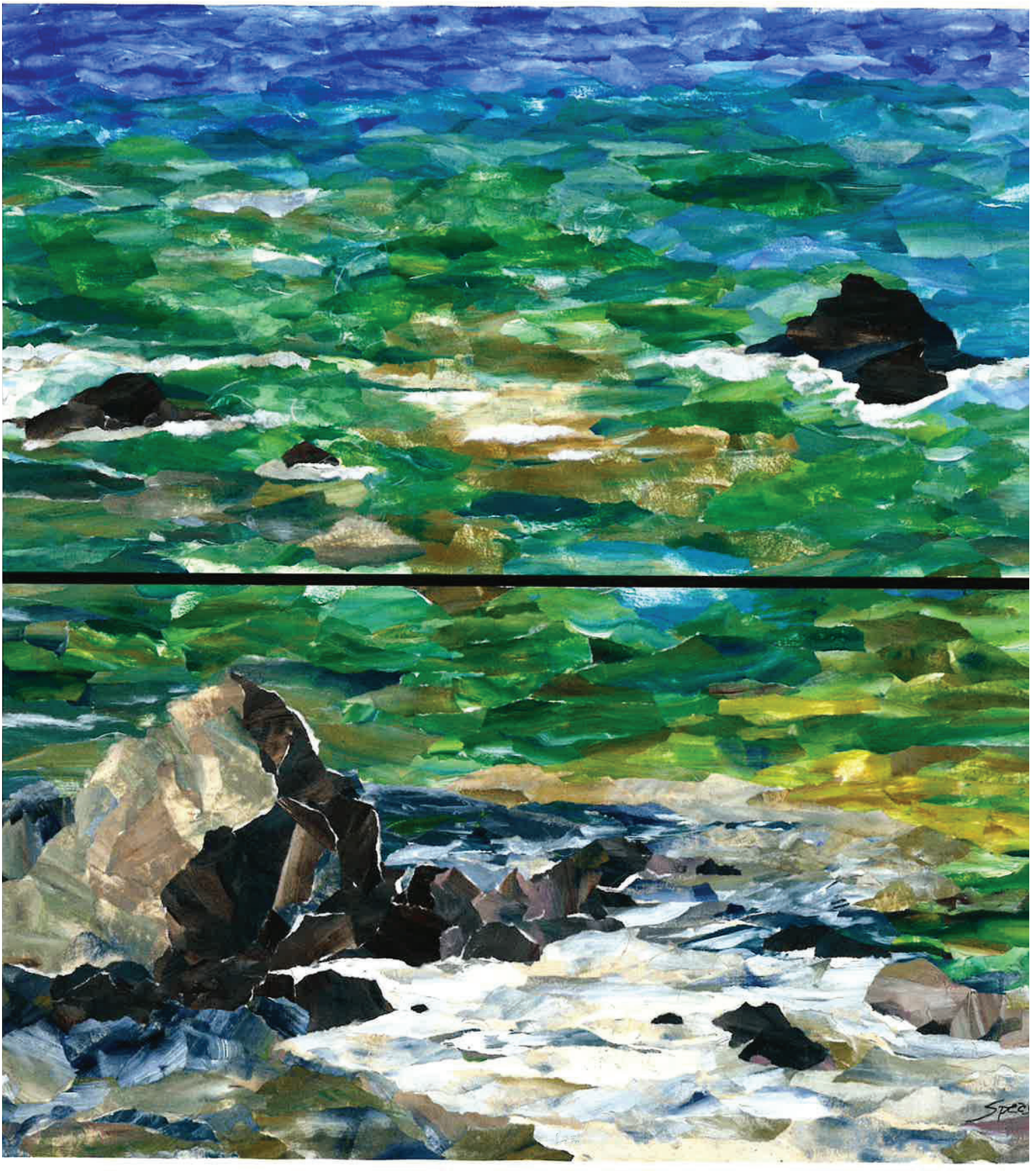
Playing with dramatic lighting, water movement and reflections is a theme that emerged early in Mary's art: "Koi were one of the subjects in that first art show and continue to fascinate me with their color and the effect their movement has on the water's surface."

After her creative debut, Mary drew inspiration from the clouds over Mana Road, the island's tropical flowers, the ocean's depth and even paddling. "I did a series of paintings that started as sketches from a canoe," she shares. However, a trip to Italy in 2007 took Mary's art in a surprising direction.

"On a walking tour of Pompeii, I saw the Alexander the Great mosaic, and from a distance, I thought it was a painting on the floor. Up close, it's over one million small pieces of stone. I was fascinated," says Mary, who returned to Hawai'i moved by the story that collage tells, specifically mosaic. While teaching a collage class a few years later, Mary realized the potential that paper possesses to create the effect of mosaic. "I started playing with hand-painted paper, tearing and gluing it."

All that came to an abrupt halt when tragedy struck again. In 2019, Phil passed away.

"It was hard to paint again. When I did, I just painted different shades of black," says Mary, who used light-



absorbing black to create the illusion of a hole. "It reflected the hole in my heart. As an artist, you can't NOT reflect what's going on in your life."

Even in the grips of grief, Mary refused to give up on mosaic. In the summer of 2022, she trained with Michael Kruzich in the Ravenna method and learned the direct method of mosaic creation in Venice. With Michael as the lead mosaicist, she designed two Italian glass mosaics: "The Embrace" and "Ho'o Maka Ana Hou."

"Every time I worked on "The Embrace" I would get excited again because I could see the magic happening, which is what I'm all about with art," Mary exclaims, adding that no matter what method or technique she uses, her art is hardly a solo endeavor.

"Art is a conversation. It's about how I can best express the emotion or subject in a way that captures a feeling so others experience it when they see the artwork," says Mary, who is passing this knowledge on by teaching weekly classes at the Ke'olu Clubhouse at Hualālai Resort in watercolor painting, collage, block printing and even experimenting with the acrylic pouring medium. Mary also leads week-long "Paint in Italy" trips, which include her daily painting courses, the opportunity to explore storied beaches and scenic villages, dining on Italian cuisine and wine tasting.

When she's not teaching, traveling, collaborating or completing commissioned projects, Mary can often be found swimming in the ocean. The result is painted paper collages like "Ocean Blues," with a glass mosaic feel and textural quality. Through overlapping layers of paper, Mary summons the changes in the ocean's color as it nears shore.

Among her favorite spots for immersing in the natural beauty that often informs her art is the Hawai'i Tropical Bioreserve and Garden outside Hilo. "Whenever I see the garden's tropical flowers, like the orange heliconia among the leaves, sparkling with light, I want to create more art pieces. It's my way of changing the world, one joyful piece at a time."

While life has taken Mary in surprising directions, she remains as playful as she was when she first picked up a brush and began painting to the sound of Phil reading poetry from the trenches. Like broken pieces of glass transformed into a stunning mosaic, the pieces of Mary's heart have been transformed into an exciting, fulfilling life that reflects the healing power of art and time.

To learn more about Mary Spears and her joyful art, visit maryspears.com or instagram@hawaii_mary.