

Artist, illustrator adds author to her résumé

By SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER | Correspondent

Toronto-born Sheila McGraw moved to Texas in 2006 after meeting her Houston-bred criminal defense lawyer and sky-diving husband, Lee McMillian, on a blind date.

“It was a big leap of faith,” McGraw said. But after four months together, they sealed the deal and eventually started house hunting.

Their dream home — a 31-year-old “comfortable/modern” Frank Lloyd Wright-ish house in the woody interior of Polly Ranch in Friendswood was full of honey bees and bad plumbing. But the 3,600-square-foot split-level structure had potential.

With a sloping backyard and meandering pathway leading to Clear Creek, the natural surroundings would be fodder for McGraw, a successful illustrator, portrait and still life artist whose career has spanned 40 years. She has recently added published author to her résumé.



Still life: Tulips and Iris, 36 by 60 inches, oil on canvas.

McGraw’s first novel, “Still Life with Cat and Mouse” (Savant Publishing), is a suspense thriller. The protagonist, Sylvia Drake, is an artist who uncovers clues to a serial killer while working on a commissioned piece.

“I didn’t read that much as a

kid,” McGraw confesses. “I just drew.”

Her mother was an artist, so McGraw learned at an early age. After attending an art magnet high school, she gave college a try but eventually dropped out and found work as an illustrator.



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KEVIN M. COX/The Daily News



Portrait of Liane, 36 by 60 inches, oil on linen.

"I was more interested in the illustrations I saw in the daily newspapers as opposed to Rembrandt," she said.

In 1986, McGraw hit pay dirt with the popular, "Love You Forever," a children's book she illustrated, written by Robert Munsch, that has since sold more than 20 million copies and is available in several languages.

When publisher Firefly Books initially approached McGraw, she was offered the option of a flat fee or royalties. Opting for royalties, it turned out to be a lucrative decision.

McGraw's life-sized portraits start at \$8,000 a pop.

She's now busy with a body of work tentatively called "The Texans." A few of the pieces are

complete and leaning against the walls of her home studio. Subjects include everyone from Kinky Friedman to Harris County District Attorney Pat Lykos.

McGraw plans to show at least a dozen portraits of colorful, edgy characters.

"I want this to be more of a social commentary," she said.

McGraw will exhibit her work from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Nov. 27, during Galveston's ArtWalk at Buchanan Gallery, 220 25th St. in the island's downtown.

So which is tougher: painting or writing?

"They're equal, but writing is more isolating," McGraw said. "I can't listen to music when writing, but I can while painting."

Reading list

Books illustrated by Sheila McGraw:
 "Love You Forever" (More than 20 million sold)
 "This Old New House"
 "My Mother's Hands"
 "My Father's Hands"
 "I Promise I'll Find You"
 "Lightning Bug Thunder"

Books written and illustrated by Sheila McGraw:

"Pussycats Everywhere"
 "Papier-Mache Today"
 "Papier-Mache for Kids"
 "Soft Toys to Sew"
 "Gifts Kids Can Make"
 "Dolls Kids Can Make"
 "Painting and Decorating Furniture"



Portrait of Pat Lykos, 40 by 40 inches, oil on linen.