

A PAINTER AT HEART

After a high-powered federal career, Patsy Fleming is drawn back to her art

BY STEVE GOLDSTEIN

INTERESTING LIVES seldom follow a straight path, but Patsy Fleming's life has had sharper turns than most.

Seemingly destined for a medical career, like many members of her prominent African-American family in Detroit, Fleming instead took up painting, then veered off from art to a 25-year career in federal government in Washington, D.C.—during which she rose to the post of AIDS czarina in the Clinton administration—before she returned to her lasting passion.

Fleming, now retired, paints in an appealingly disheveled studio in her home on Massachusetts Avenue in Bethesda—where she has lived since a divorce in the 1960s—and favors 3-foot-square canvases. At 80, following double knee replacements, she moves easily and exudes youthful vitality. She paints two or three times a week for three to four hours per session, mainly using acrylics, and exhibits perhaps once a year at the co-op Foundry Gallery in the District.

"I love my studio," she says, pointing at canvases in varying stages of

completion. "I spend lots of time here, not only painting, but also reading, eating, thinking and trying to understand where my painting is going. I am grateful to have the space that is all mine. It is my sanctuary."

Her work is in private collections and has been exhibited in Edinburgh, Scotland; St. Petersburg, Russia; and many U.S. cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

Fleming developed her interest in art at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she was taking premed courses, following in the footsteps of her father and other male family members who were doctors. A boyfriend suggested that she try an art class, and Fleming soon began studying art history and studio art, discovering an ardor as well as an aptitude for painting. Medicine receded into the background. "From the minute I picked up the brush," she says, "my heart changed its mind."

After graduating from Vassar with a degree in zoology and a minor in art,



Artist Patsy Fleming's work has been exhibited around the world.

Fleming married and moved to the District for her husband's new job. After they divorced, and with three young children to support, she worked as a researcher at Howard University before being recruited by the Congressional Black Caucus.

Staff positions with a series of congressmen followed, including one with Rep. Ted Weiss, a New York Democrat who chaired the oversight committee of the Department of Health and Human Services. Fleming was assigned to a subcommittee and chosen to work

on issues dealing with HIV and AIDS. "I had no particular expertise," Fleming says. "One of my three sons is gay, but I was thrown into it and quickly got to know all the players."

Fleming ultimately held other government jobs and then worked in the Clinton administration, where she last served as director of national AIDS policy from 1994 to 1997. During those years, she made time in her hectic work schedule to refine her art through classes at the Yellow Barn in Glen Echo.

"I paint with fearlessness, and let

the painting move in a direction that I respond to," says Fleming, who now paints abstracts in bright colors. "A big blank canvas is a challenge, but also a doorway to excitement and delight. I love the feel of my brush in the acrylic paint; it is seductive, sexy."

Painting releases Fleming's sense of "crisis" over the world's problems, such as drug abuse, violence against women, environmental degradation and war. She expresses her turmoil over these issues in paintings dominated by red and black. "I paint with

empathy and vitality to escape our continual state of crisis," she says.

Her years of dealing with political and social issues are also reflected in how she paints. "Color and line are my vehicles for the expression of memory, imagination and a lifetime of witness," she says.

She's ready, though, to move on to brighter topics. "I love the sun and the water, so I'm going to do more paintings with yellows and blues and get away from red, orange...that kind of intensity," she says. ■

PHOTO BY MICHAEL VENTURA