

Business By Candice Baker

**CITY FOCUS: Walls become works of art**

Laguna Garden Murals partners with plein-air artists to create outdoor murals based on their work for homeowners.

**Jo Ellen Byrnes, a Laguna Beach businesswoman with a new venture and a new outlook.**

Jo Ellen Byrnes, owner of Laguna Garden Murals, stands in front of a mural painted on the side of a garage wall.

[www.lagunagardenmurals.com](http://www.lagunagardenmurals.com) (949)633-9628

With **Laguna Garden Murals**, founded earlier this year, Byrnes plans to take advantage of a growing market by acquiring the exclusive rights to create murals from the works of several Plein air artists.

**FEATURE TOP PLEIN AIR ARTISTS**

"I have a lot of incredible artists; I'm so blessed to work with them," Byrnes said. Byrnes chose members of the Laguna Plein Air Painters Assn. (LPAPA) as the initial artists for her new project.

They include LPAPA founding member Cynthia Britain; longtime Mattel creative Martin Arriola; Julie Houck, who will represent the United States at the Florence Biennale 2007; outdoorsman and former police officer Gene Costanza; painter and teacher Mark Farina; Tom Brown, who creates daily paintings for eBay; and Sterling Hoffmann, who also works as a healer. "I wanted to find people who loved doing this as much as I love doing it," she said.

**INSPIRED BY KEN AUSTER**

The seed of her dream came from classes with Laguna artist Ken Auster. "He really inspired me to say, let's take this to the next level," Byrnes said. "I thought, if I could do what I wanted to do, what would it look like?"

She also spent time thinking about what it was that made her love Laguna. The Pageant of the Masters readily came to mind, so Byrnes thought about bringing Laguna images into people's homes. Byrnes found the combination of plein-air art and beautiful living spaces irresistible. "These are all the things that I love," she said.

The rise of stores like the EXPO Design Center and Lowe's, which focus on aesthetics in addition to just basic home

improvement wares, proved to Byrnes that the market was there, but she also sensed a demand for an additional, more personal niche.

"Where else are people going to find this for their homes?" she asked. "There are only so many plants you can put up."

So she partnered with the LPAPA artists and found a crew of muralists through word-of-mouth, advertisements and by talking with the Laguna College of Art & Design. She took several months to interview and select her crew, which she trains thoroughly in safety, technique and etiquette before they begin. "I don't want the homeowners to feel like they have to survive the process," she said.

**Murals are Siite-Specific**

"Each painting has a feeling to it," Byrnes said. "It's not about just taking an image and plunking it down because you like the picture. It has to look seamless."

A mural installed in the backyard of a Corona del Mar bungalow, (pictured left) pictorially extended the yard's fence onto a 20-foot cement garage wall. The team then painted a Heisler Park-esque vista above the "fence," creating the trompe l'oeil illusion of prime oceanfront property from the confines of the backyard.

"It's something that's a little bit different," Byrnes said of the design. They know they aren't painting the Sistine Chapel — they're Lagunafying very high-end landscaping," said the homeowner David Harshbarger.

The mural teams will be rotated, to ensure each team member can perform all of the necessary functions, from prep work to painting. The crew will often be given demonstrations by the plein air artists in how they work, and what makes their art unique. "They're being taught by the best," Byrnes said. "And it gives the young, up-and-coming artists a chance to connect to the larger community."

She said that the company will also expose homeowners to the work of plein air artists with whom they may not normally be familiar.

Byrnes said that the murals can also add to a property's sale price. "It's a hidden value in homes," she said; the muralists use the highest quality paints to ensure longevity.

Quality is important to Byrnes, a self-described perfectionist. For each project, she conducts an extensive site survey, examining wall types and potential issues; the company specializes in outdoor textures like stucco and other potentially problematic finishes.

Byrnes plans to complete each project within five days, bringing in as many people as necessary to complete the piece on time. Each project is completed in phases, but the phase teams work together to decrease wasted time, Byrnes said. "You just have to keep it simple, and figure out a way to make it work," she said.