REAL ESTATE

Artist, Baldwin native Michael White paints custom watercolors of houses

Michael White used old family photographs to paint a watercolor of Kate Avallone-Serra's childhood home in Baldwin.
Credit: Kate Avallone-Serra; Michael White

By Rachel Weiss
rachel.weiss@newsday.com @RachMWeiss

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White shingle siding. A screened-in porch. Perfectly trimmed bushes surrounding the perimeter.

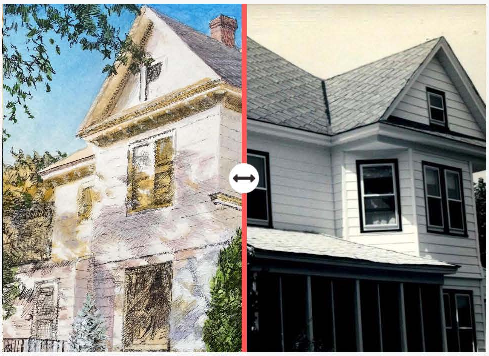
This is what Kate Avallone-Serra remembers of her childhood home in Baldwin. After her mother died two years ago, she and her four siblings also had to say goodbye to the house where they grew up.

So Avallone-Serra turned to an artist — who also happened to be a family friend — Michael White. She wanted him to capture the snapshot of the house that still burned bright in her mind: the way she remembered it as a child.

"He worked from a photo I found, because of course, over the years there were lots of renovations and changes to the exterior," said Avallone-Serra, 58, now working for the Albany Public Library.

"Mike worked with me on recreating the house the way it looked when I was a kid, and he was absolutely determined to get it right, because it was meaningful for him, as well as for us."

Michael White painted this picture of Kate Avallone-Serra's childhood home based on old photos.



Credit: Michael White; Kate Avallone-Serra

Interactive content by Flourish

White actually does this for a living. He's created dozens of house portraits for Long Islanders, starting with ink and then going in with watercolor to bring each home to life on paper.

White grew up in Baldwin and lived in Garden City for several years, but has since relocated to Red Bank, New Jersey. Most of his requests for artwork come from Long Islanders — so he still has quite a connection to his roots.

"It started out with me doing drawings of houses I found the most compelling," said White, 54. While biking or driving in his car, if he spotted some interesting architecture or if the light was hitting a home just right, he'd stop, take a photo and use it while sketching. Then White started posting the finished products on Facebook.

"When people saw those, they'd reach out to me and say, 'Can you do one of my home?' " he said.

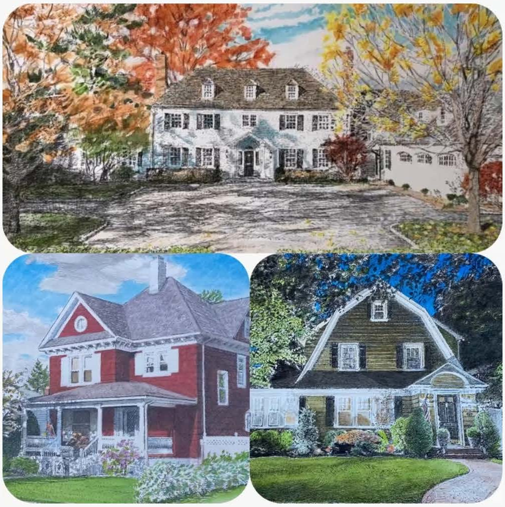
It takes White between 16 and 20 hours to complete a 12-by-16-inch portrait. Those cost

$750, while smaller drawings can range between $200 and $300.

"I've done all kinds of houses, from tiny Capes to Tudor Revival manors," he said. "Recently I've been doing several pieces in Northport, which are very beautiful homes. I've gotten commissions from people in Baldwin, and those are very interesting to me because I know that town in my bones."

White has created the most portraits based on houses in Garden City — a community with which he's also intimately familiar. Both sets of his grandparents owned homes there as he grew up, and his own family lived there for seven years, after relocating from New York City.

"I knew a lot of the houses and landmarks," said White, "so while I was there, it was almost like living my childhood again, but I had a new appreciation for all this incredible architecture."



White has painted homes in Manhasset, top, his native Baldwin, left, and West Hempstead. Credit: Michael White

The stonework and irregular masonry of Tudor Revivals, or the unusual proportions of a Queen Anne Victorian, make for artistic challenges in texture and depiction — and White is more than happy to rise to the occasion.

"It seems to me like every house has poetic potential, even really small ones or new ones," he said. "You can look for ways to bring it out by focusing on its setting or the angle or the sunlight. I'm interested in creating an overall effect; I don't just do a house with blank white space around it."

When Avallone-Serra first saw the artwork White created for her and her siblings, she said she cried tears of joy. He got it all right: The house, beaming in dapples of sunlight. Just as she remembered it.

The painting hangs in her home in Albany, over a fireplace. It is the first thing visitors see when walking through the front door.

"The house was a huge focal point for my mom," said Avallone-Serra, who had prints of the painting made for her siblings. "She kept it up, and she was a real homemaker."

A family with a young child has since moved in, she said — a homecoming that was both bittersweet and exciting for Avallone-Serra's family to witness.

"I think Mike's work found me at the right time," she said. "Because we were closing that chapter in our family's life, it just seemed like the natural way to put a bow on it."

This is why White does what he does — there's a particular pride and a sentimentality that comes with growing up in a Long Island home, and his goal is to commemorate that.

"In a way, it's sort of a family portrait," White said of his work. "But rather than being one moment in time, it's a family symbol, across lots of time."

By Rachel Weiss

rachel.weiss@newsday.com 𝕏@RachMWeiss

Rachel Weiss joined Newsday in 2016. As a real estate/living multimedia reporter, Rachel writes feature stories and contributes to and appears in on-camera video packages. She was the lead reporter on Newsday's LI Acts of Kindness series.

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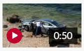

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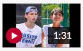

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