Superstition, religion and unforeseen circumstances, all in painstaking detail. Miniature fires pop up at the oddest places. Catholic cardinals hang out with the catch of the day. It's all possible in the world of Julie Speed, a Texas painter on the frontier of contemporary art; her deft hand and limitless imagination are making figurative pieces compatible with modernity. She recently showed at the Gerald Peters Gallery in Dallas, and come spring, her works will be displayed at its sister space in New York. All this, and a weighty book just out, beautiful and startling with each turn of the page.

CF: When did you know you wanted to be an artist?
JS: The minute I figured out I couldn't be a caveman or a pirate.

CF: Do you view yourself as a traditional painter?
JS: The artists that I've admired have spanned the centuries. I'm just as interested in Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud as I am in Botticelli and...
Mantegna, as well as Australian aboriginal painters and Persian miniaturists … I use different conventions from different times and places. A convention is the way you set up a painting … something that might look familiar in a different context.

CF: In your new book, you describe your work as “pararealism.” What does that mean?
JS: “Surrealism” means over and above realism; “para” means alongside. The collages you could call surreal, but the paintings are almost always something that could happen, not a completely impossible situation.

"IF NOBODY EVER SAW MY PAINTINGS, I'D STILL PAINT EVERY DAY." –JULIE SPEED

CF: Did the profile of your husband, Fran Christina, former drummer for The Fabulous Thunderbirds, inspire the noses in your earlier portraits?
JS: I just keep drawing his nose. I think it’s because I’m nose-deficient myself. I have nose envy. I saw him for the first time from across the room when we were 16. I grabbed my girlfriend, pointed to him and said, “See that guy with the big nose? I’m going to marry him.”

CF: Does Fran collaborate with you?
JS: Yes. He printed all the aquatint squares for a recent collage. His printing studio is right next to mine.

CF: What’s the concept of the “Behind the Queen of My Room” series?
JS: That just came to me as a poem. The first painting and the poem arrived full-form simultaneously. Ideas come to me on long drives or in the bathtub. Sometimes, they just keep coming no matter what; then they don’t come for a while.

CF: You don’t work from models, so how do you bring a subject into your mind as you prepare to put the form onto canvas?
JS: You can touch humans, dogs, cats or whatever, and you can go over the form in your mind and think of your fingers on the animal. In that way, you internalize the image and make it go right to the brush. Something really little, like a wasp or locust, you have to paint over and over again to get right because you can’t feel things like that.

CF: How do you know when a painting is finished?
JS: When I do get there, it’s really apparent. I can work on a piece for weeks and then one day, it’s just there. The portrait is looking back at me. You can’t just stop when the person in the painting comes alive, because the painting might not be finished. But as you continue, you have to be careful not to bury the subject back into the paint again.

CF: Is solitude a prerequisite?
JS: I like the idea of a monastic existence, in which you didn’t have to interact with the outside world, and all you had to do was stay in your cell and paint.

CF: Where do you find your solace?
JS: Friends have a ranch in Blanco, where I like to sit on the porch watching the river with a stack of books, or I like to drive out to West Texas.

CF: Is painting a sensual pleasure?
JS: Absolutely. Just like cooking or gardening, I like the smell of paint and everything about it.

CF: What advice would you give a young artist?
JS: Don’t wait for days of inspiration. I think the hardest thing is working through the self-doubt when you walk in the studio and everything looks muddled.

CF: Is the viewer’s experience important to you?
JS: If nobody ever saw my paintings, I’d still paint everyday.