

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS



This is illustration from
Janet Montecalvo's new book.
(Contributed photo)

Signs of success

By **Jennifer Lord**/ Daily News Staff
Thursday, August 31, 2006

You may have seen Janet Montecalvo's artwork already. You probably didn't realize it.

That's because her biggest paintings were signs -- on billboards, windows and trucks. They weren't exactly what she envisioned when she first dreamed of a career in art, but they did allow her to become the first licensed female sign painter in the International Brotherhood of Sign Painters.

The canvas is a bit smaller for Montecalvo's latest work, "Sofie and the City," a children's picture book written by Karima Grant. The Framingham artist's illustrations from the book are the focus of an exhibit that will open at the Danforth Museum of Art Sept. 10.

"It really shows what goes into illustrating a book," said Montecalvo, who has been working as a freelance artist with her own business, Montecalvo Illustration, since 1981.

"Sofie and the City" is the story of Sofie, who moved from Senegal to an American city with her family. But her mother works during the day, her father works all night and during the day she finds the city streets ugly -- until the day she is befriended by a little girl whose chalk drawings bridge the gap between her former and current homes.

The finished paintings that became the detailed canvas of "Sofie and the City" are included in the exhibit, along with a few of her initial concepts for the drawings.

"I do really detailed sketches in the black and white because I really want to make sure they know what they're getting," Montecalvo said.

Having them in the exhibit also shows the viewers that painting is a process, something she stresses to her students at the Brophy and McCarthy elementary schools in Framingham, where she has taught for five years.

"I try to have the kids in school do little tiny thumbnails before committing to the big paper," Montecalvo said. "They want to see it happen all at once."

A little-known fact about children's book publishing is that it's rarely a collaborative effort between author and illustrator. Montecalvo, who had previously illustrated four other titles, was commissioned by Grant's publisher to do the artwork.

"I said 'I'll take it' and he said 'You have to read it first,' and I said 'No, I'll take it!'" Montecalvo said with a laugh.

"Sofie and the City" has been nominated by Boyds Mills Press for the Golden Kite award for children's illustration. Should it win, Montecalvo could put it next to her Emmy, which she won in 1989 for her graphic design contributions to the television special "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

Montecalvo's screen credits also include set design and "signwriting" for the movies "Mermaids," "Second Sight," "Stanley & Iris" and "The Brinks Job." She also worked on the television miniseries "The Kennedys & Fitzgeralds," "America's Most Wanted" and "Spenser for Hire."

Her illustrations also appear on greeting cards, calendars and national T-shirt lines as well as in murals at Children's Hospital in Boston and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

More Danforth Museum activities

In addition to her exhibit in the children's gallery, "Sofie and the City" author Janet Montecalvo will teach two fall classes in the Danforth Museum School for children in grades 1 to 3:

- "Paint with Chalk" will be offered on Saturday, Sept. 16, 10 a.m. to noon.
- "Flip Flop Art" will be offered on Saturday, Oct. 14, 10 a.m. to noon.

The cost for each class is \$20 for museum members, \$25 for non-members.

Register on Family Fund Day on Sunday, Sept. 10 (with free admission) or call 508-620-0937. More details are on www.danforthmuseum.org.

WHO: Illustrator Janet Montecalvo

WHEN: Sunday, Sept. 10, 3 p.m.

WHERE: Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham

COST: Free

INFO: 508-620-0050, www.danforthmuseum.org