

At 73, artist **Liz Gribin** is introducing her quiet, contemplative paintings to a surprising new audience – shoppers in Banana Republic stores around the world. All it took was one yard sale.

BY TINASUTTON

perfect fit

LIZ GRIBIN KNOWS A THING OR TWO ABOUT serendipity. In 1939, her family happened to be on vacation in Switzerland when the Nazis invaded her native Poland, allowing them to flee safely to the United States. In the 1950s, she happened to be studying fine arts at Boston University just as noted figurative expressionist David Aronson began teaching his inspirational painting courses. And last year, she held a yard sale



on Long Island, which proved to be the perfect steppingstone for showing her artwork at Banana Republic stores around the world. How's that again?

"We were moving from Bridgehampton to Boston last February to be near our children and had to get rid of a lifetime of collected stuff," explains the 73-year-old painter, whose works have sold for as much as \$45,000. The "stuff" included a number of Gribin's small paintings and drawings. Nat, her husband of 51 years, put an ad for the sale in the tony town's newspaper. It caught the eye of local lawyer Errol Margolin, who stopped by and bought a slew of Gribin's art. He then mentioned the works to a client – who just happened to be assembling an in-store art program for Banana Republic set to begin this month.

Over the next three years, the large retail chain will be rotating high-quality reproductions of 54 pieces by 13 artists throughout its 500-plus stores, including locations in Canada, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Marrying fashion and art is a budding trend among retailers. In March, Macy's placed fine art photographs alongside new spring merchandise in the windows of its Manhattan store. And many clothing boutiques, like Parlor in Boston's South End, display and sell local artists' work. But Banana Republic's three-year commitment is a first for a major fashion retailer, according to Chris Nicklo, vice president of marketing for the company. "This is not a revenue-making opportunity," Nicklo says. Well, at least not directly. "Whether you're a collector or just on a human level, art evokes

emotion and engages people, and that's what we want to do as a brand."

Enter Cary Leitzes, founder of the 18-month-old company ARTCO, based in New York, which partners brands with artists. She was hired to curate Banana Republic's art selections, and at the urging of Margolin, took a three-hour train ride to meet with Gribin. What she found were color-filled, expressionist paintings featuring abstracted, contemplative figures, seemingly off in their own worlds. "What I responded to in Liz's work," Leitzes says, "is the juxtaposition between sadness and beauty. There's a real emotion beneath the surface."

This is a bit incongruous with the creator, who is as cheerful and optimistic as a talk-show host.



■■■
"Variations of Vermilion"

■■■
"The Monologue"

"I think of my work as a combination of abstraction and figurative," says the spry painter, who lives and works in a South End apartment so sunny, it's been baking her paint tubes. "The figure is not a portrait, but has more to do with body language and emotion – and the emotion comes from my own life experience."

In addition to the many fortuitous events in her life, Gribin has also suffered her share of tragedy, including the sudden death of her mother on holiday when Gribin was in her 20s as well as the horseback riding accident that left her youngest son in a monthlong coma, followed by years of rehabilitation.

Elizabeth Novick, manager of Boston's Newbury Fine Arts, where Gribin's work is sold, says

the artist's life experiences are inescapable in her paintings. "There's a great sense of merging of the figure and the background. It's hard to tell where each begins and ends," says Novick, who sees tranquility rather than sadness in Gribin's subjects. "There's a real connection to living and being in the moment."

Gribin has been juggling moments her whole life. "I found it a struggle to get where I am, because it's very hard for women generally, and me especially, to put everything ahead of my art – which I sometimes have to do," says the mother of three, who got married two weeks after graduating from BU in 1956. "What happened with my son – my husband [also] has had a tremendous amount of health issues – I always

feel like I'm trying to play catch-up."

Gribin started showing her work publicly in 1979, after studying with artist Paul Wood, who lived nearby on Long Island. She says he helped her find her style and understand the intricacies of color that became the hallmark of her poetic approach. Now, nearly 30 years later, her career moves to its biggest stage yet. But does it matter that her vision will be used to help sell dresses and trendy knits? "I never thought of my work being used in a commercial way," Gribin says. "But why not, if people are going to enjoy looking at it?" ■

Tina Sutton writes "The Clothes We Wear" column for the Globe Magazine. E-mail her at tsutton@globe.com.