Portrait of the artist just trying to stay solvent: Rebecca Smith in her Brooklyn gallery.

Photograph by Alexei Hay

Name: **Rebecca Smith**

Age: **34**

Coming from: **New Haven**

Looking for: **Recognition**

She thought she knew how to make it as a painter. But she neglected to do one thing.

How to Become An Instant Art Star

By Deborah Solomon

What can happen in a year? Nothing. Everything.

Rebecca Smith arrived in New York a little more than a year ago, a young artist with a master's degree from Yale. It might seem overly optimistic if not preposterous to assume that her life could be radically altered in the space of a single year. If you're an artist, you're lucky if anything happens in 10 years. You're lucky if anything happens in the course of your entire miserable life.

And yet, since she moved to New York, Smith's life has changed beyond recognition. Granted, she did not undergo a Schnabel-like apotheosis, did not have a sellout show or receive a surprise call from the likes of Mary Boone. No, this isn't a story about that kind of rocket-to-the-top success.

Here are some of the things that happened to Becky Smith this year: She moved into her own place on Franklin Street in the Green-

My First Year in New York

1980 Michael Cunningham

I lived that first year in a cheap, unheated loft on Water Street, literally in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, with my friends Francis O'Shea and Darrah Cloud. This was 20 years ago, before the South Street Seaport, when Water Street looked like the set of a movie about postwar Berlin, when at most hours its only visible inhabitants were a tribe of scrappy but prosperous cats.

Our landlord — the same one who neglected to mention that our loft was unheated — habitually assured new tenants that the six-story building had a freight elevator that opened onto each loft. He didn't tell them it had not worked in at least 50 years. Newcomers would arrive with vans full of furniture, ring for the elevator and wait. And wait.

Confronted, the landlord would rig up a pulley system, open the trapdoors that closed the shaft on each floor and help them haul their possessions up by means of an ancient hydraulic winch. So every now and then we moved Francis's bed out of the elevator shaft, opened the trapdoors, made cocktails and watched as someone's earthly goods gradually ascended past our floor to an upper one.

Here came a great green dowager of a sofa, then a pine table, then a queen-size bed with cherubs carved on its headboard. On moving days, with all six trapdoors open, you could look some 90 feet straight up and see, all along the brick walls, pictures hanging in gilt frames, candles in niches, hat racks with hats on them, exactly like the rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland.

Above us lived an ordinary-looking middle-aged man and woman. They were robust, vaguely suburban; he prone to chinos and polo shirts, she to sheath dresses and nylons. They were neither friendly nor hostile; their only visible mystery was the fact that they lived in this neighborhood at all, stepping complacently each morning over the weedy sidewalks and broken cobbles in their sensible shoes. Every night, however, they stomped around on the floorboards over our heads as if they were marching to an especially rousing Sousa selection, and often, at least three or four times a night, they dropped the Object.

The Object fell, always, with a thud decisive enough to rattle the light bulb over our kitchen table. It seemed to be about the size and weight of an ottoman, with a solid/soft quality, like a medicine ball. It fell every night, at unpredictable intervals. It became impossible not to wait for it. It was equally impossible to ask them about it — they were as self-contained as manatees, and about that approachable. We decided that they had a curse on them: they were permitted to live obscurely, incognito, unpunished for their crimes, but whenever they were at home one or the other of them had, at all times, to be carrying the Object, which we came to imagine as a giant potato, tufted here and there with hair, teeth and eyes. Naturally they dropped it every now and then.

Approximately once a month a huge bin, the size of six conventional Dumpsters, appeared in front of the warehouse down the block, overflowing with shoes. They were variously women's, men's and children's shoes; some were new and some used. Passers-by made arrangements of them. During the days of the shoes we'd come home to find 10 or more pairs of spike heels, or cowboy boots, or wingtips, sometimes in a straight line down the middle of the street, sometimes in more elaborate formations. Once we found a phantom choir of little girls' patent-leather party shoes in prim lines on the stairs to our building.

After two or three days the shoes were gone again, though we never saw anyone take them away. The arranged pairs were always left behind, along with miscellaneous spillage: a brand-new platform shoe might lie on its side in a puddle; a well-worn hiking boot might still stand, stalwart as an old dog, on the shattered sidewalk.

to the gallery, a five-minute ride. I got into the van, and Elliott Smith's "Waltz No. 2" was on the tape deck. "Easy listening for ex-punk rockers," she noted brightly as we sped off.

A few days later, we met at Bellwether to talk about her work. The gallery was stone quiet — it's open only on weekends — and Becky was in an uncharacteristically anxious mood. She was wondering how her peers viewed the gallery. They could see it as an inspired gesture, but they could also see it in cynical terms; i.e., as a career move, a way to focus attention on herself. New York is like that: the capital of art, the capital of resentniks. Everyone in the art world is always accusing everyone else of being overly ambitious, as if the detractors were as pure as Buddhist monks.

"Do you like my work?" Becky asked with a straight face, seating herself in a tattered lavender chair in her studio. "It's so feminine and girlie. I feel like it's non-Zeitgeist stuff."

Actually, at a time when painting is making a comeback, and when much of the new painting asserts the overlap between high and low, craft and kitsch, Becky's work is in sync with the movement. She specializes in fantasy landscapes whose pastel tones and frilly forms might be described as contemporary rococo. Most of her imagery is swiped from somewhere else: Victorian postcards, or curvy architectural ornaments, or reproductions of those overly grand, empty landscapes produced by the Hudson River School. Taken together, the references suggest a mood of romantic longing.

Looking at her paintings, I was reminded that appropriation, which began as a gravely hip joke where everything coyly alludes to itself, has lately turned unironic. I asked her whether her generation is post-postmodernism, beyond cuteness, beyond cleverness, trying to rehabilitate art as a form of personal communication.

"Definitely," she said, sipping a cup of tea. "I think of my work as a suite of paintings for an unknown beloved. What do human beings long for? They long to be known, they long to possess, to have an affinity with one who can truly appreciate them. It struck me last year that I was longing for a soulmate."

Taking her comment perhaps too literally, I asked her whether she has a boyfriend. "I've spent so much of my life chasing love," she said with a sigh. "But now I think, let it chase me. My life changed when I stopped chasing love. In my mind, I picture myself as a Victorian spinster in some mansard house up on a cliff, living with my dogs."

IN THE END, THE SHOW WASN'T REVIEWED IN any art magazines or newspapers, except for WaterfrontWeek, a Brooklyn freebie memorable mainly for its restaurant ads. None of her paintings sold. Even so, she tried to be upbeat, to think of the show as a "positive experience," as she says, and she felt consoled whenever she made a mental list of the many artists who had seen it: Amy Sillman, Rochelle Feinstein, Catherine Opie, Sam Messer and even Lisa Yuskavage, with whom she had reconciled.

But in the months following the show, disappointments began piling up. She couldn't believe it when she was passed over for "Greater New York," a much-discussed survey show at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center that claimed to

feature every young artist in the metropolis with any promise. "I was praying I'd get in," she says. "Artists are like racehorses. Collectors, dealers and critics aren't willing to bet on us until we've run a few races."

And then there was the Tiffany ordeal. Tiffany grants are given every other year to "emerging artists," a euphemism for artists with no track record. If you are chosen you get $20,000 to spend however you wish. Becky was nominated by David Pease, a former dean of the Yale School of Art who is on the board of the Tiffany foundation. "She's someone who's serious about what she's doing," Pease says. "She's committed to pursuing a life in art." Becky knew the grant was a long shot, but isn't anything possible if you want it enough?

One evening a few weeks before Christmas, Becky was making the rounds of the Williamsburg studios when she dropped in on Jeff Gauntt, a painter of stylish psychological landscapes. In the middle of the studio visit, he told her he had some good news. "I just got a Tiffany," he said with a bashful smile.

It was as if someone had slapped her. Jeff heard. Jeff heard. Jeff heard. It was all she could think about.

She went home and, holding back the tears, called David Pease. "Next time," he said in a soothing voice.

By then she had no money in the bank and the proverbial rent was due. Unable to get a grant, she came up with a novel idea. "I gave myself my own grant," she says. "I gave myself a platinum-card grant" — in short, a loan of $6,000. She figured she would be able to repay it once she managed to sell a few paintings. But as the year wore on, no income came in, and Bellwether, despite its spirited monthly shows, never did turn a profit. With the arrival of summer, she owed Visa about $16,000. "My card was maxed out," she says. She was fearful she would sink as fast as she rose.

AMAZINGLY ENOUGH, SHE MANAGED TO GET herself out of the hole in the space of a single night — a classic moment of Becky-ish ingenuity. One Sunday in June, she held a barbecue-raffle to benefit the gallery; tickets were sold for $100 a pop, and everyone was guaranteed to win a prize, a photograph or a drawing or even a not-awful painting donated by a young artist. On the night of the bash, the block of Franklin Street that is home to Bellwether was closed off to traffic. The raffle was one of those events that require tremendous planning and coordination, and I still recall my astonishment standing on the food line in the sweltering heat, music blasting, bodies swaying, grills blazing, and noticing a few hundred savory lentil burgers neatly arrayed in aluminum pans — those, too, a donation. By the end of the evening, $24,000 had been raised.

Becky is so proficient an organizer that at times I wondered whether she would end her first year in New York by deciding to give up painting. I had read somewhere that only 1 percent of art students actually become artists. The rest drift off into other fields, and I found it easy to imagine Becky 10 years down the road as some kind of impresario: the director of a major Chelsea gallery, perhaps, or the highly praised manager of a huge and unwieldy government arts program.

Late one afternoon I mentioned this to her, but I regretted it as soon as the words came out, for she appeared a bit wounded. It was summer, and we were in her minivan, heading over the Williamsburg Bridge. In the distance, Manhattan shimmered like an island from a fairy tale.

"If I thought that starting Bellwether was going to make me an art dealer, I never would have done it," Becky said. "I don't want to be a dealer. I'm a painter." Her comment reminded me that I hadn't seen her work in a while and, feeling neglectful, I promptly made an appointment to drop by her studio.

When I arrived a few days later, several large paintings were leaning against the far wall. Becky began talking about them freely and thoughtfully, but to my puzzlement, they were the same paintings I had seen on my previous studio visit seven months earlier.

"I'd rather see your new work," I said.

"I don't have any new work," Becky replied without apology. Curled up in her lavender chair, dressed in a striped tank top, black pants and sandals, she suddenly looked younger, almost like a willful adolescent.

"What do you mean? You haven't made any paintings this year?"

"No," she said, "none, except for that tiny painting I made for the raffle. All the paintings in my studio were done before I moved to New York."

For nearly a year, I had imagined her ensconced in her studio, thinking hard about art, working feverishly, discarding false starts and struggling to create meaningful objects. But in fact she had done no such thing.

What had the year brought? It was disturbing to contemplate: a hundred parties, a hundred new art-world connections. She had lived out the life of a New York artist with all the social trappings and trimmings — with everything except for the difficult, solitary labor of making art. She could see the disappointment on my face.

"It's weird with me and my work," she said calmly. "There are periods when I work intensely, but I need to get into a dreamy-fantasy state to do my painting, and this year I was busy just moving to New York and trying to support myself."

In the days afterward, I wondered if I had been overly judgmental. It's certainly true that the hardships of city life can drain your resources and be a frustrating deterrent to creativity. Besides, what's one year? A life in art, with its inevitable setbacks and heartbreaks, counts only in the long run; the winners are the ones who sustain their passion and concentration over time. Surely it was way too soon to have any real sense of Becky's future, her plot, her destiny.

A week or so later, I called her to apologize, but I never did reach her. Her answering machine picked up, and I was surprised to hear a new message. "Hi. It's Becky," the taped voice said. "I'm probably home but I can't come to the phone because I'm trying to paint." ■

My First Year in New York

1949 Liz Smith

I arrived in the city and, having failed to impress The New Yorker, Time, Newsweek or any of the eight New York newspapers with my journalism degree, I went to work for one of the last of the movie magazines, Modern Screen. The publication and its rival, Photoplay, were real fan magazines and extremely benign. We wrote over and over about the same young stars — Elizabeth Taylor, Piper Laurie, Debbie Reynolds, Tab Hunter and Tony Curtis. According to Modern Screen they all lived blameless, perfect lives.

I took on some extra jobs to help my finances, typing for Blue Cross in the evenings and working as a proofreader for Newsweek on the weekends. It was here in the old offices on 42nd Street that I began to feel like a real New Yorker. There were no computers then, so the proofreading experience was personal and unique. A "pitcher" (the reader) read aloud every word, comma, question mark and quote to a "catcher" (the checker). Then a dot went over every word to indicate it was O.K. There was an arcane language to proofing. We used "com" for comma, "query" for question mark, "screamer" for an exclamation point and "stop" for every period. Anyone listening to us would have thought we were dealing in Sanskrit.

We proofers worked in almost total seclusion, away from the clacking typewriters and the big-deal editors and reporters. (Occasionally, we'd catch glimpses of them in the elevator.) Still, we were part of a real news operation, and we felt as if we were the vanguard of perfection, sitting up in our dark offices above Times Square, the last people to see the news before it went out to the world.