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Artist Draws On Experience

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STAFF WRITER

Sheila Isham is bullish about her future. No wonder — the past has neatly dealt her just the kind of life changes that help an artist blossom.

The wife of a foreign service officer, the Sagaponack artist has grown through the cultural changes her husband's postings brought. She has studied in other countries and shown her work overseas.

The couple's three children also blossomed through their overseas education: the eldest, ABC-TV newsman **Christopher Isham**, is just back from Saudi Arabia, his mother said.

As for those bulls, they're powerful symbols from her "Cosmic Earth" series in oils, included in her exhibit opening at the Ruth Segal Gallery in Manhattan on Wednesday and continuing through May 5.

The bull theme has grown from animal and bird themes the artist has explored for two decades. In those years her works have appeared in exhibits here and abroad, and she has lectured on art here and abroad.

Isham, who grew up in Cedarhurst, went on to study philosophy, art history and French in college. "I felt if you know you are going to specialize in something such as art, it's a good idea not to start out in it, but to explore other things," she said.

After graduation, she met and married **Heyward Isham**, and from then on she blended travels, raising a family, and developing as an artist and a person. But, looking back on her life, she noted "it's not easy to travel around with art. There has to be a lot of grace and flexibility."

Her husband was posted to West Germany first, in the early 1950s. Germany, she said, provided the formation for her in art.

"It was a very disciplined concept of art," she said. "What's interesting about the way you're trained in Berlin is that you're given abstract concepts and taught in abstract language, but at the same time you had



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Artist Sheila Isham, whose work has benefited from her experiences overseas, with one of her oil paintings

to be thoroughly disciplined in all the academic skills of drawing, painting and printmaking."

Berlin, she explained, was the great meeting place between East and West, between the Soviet Union and Western Europe.

With this solid foundation in place, Isham next found herself exploring the East — during her husband's three-year Moscow assignment. "I immersed myself in Russian literature and theater and music, met a lot of poets, learned Russian and traveled quite a bit alone around Russia," she said. "I was followed and arrested at times for sketching outside — the old houses and street scenes."

Stints in Washington, D.C., Hong Kong, Paris and Haiti followed. The Far East also impacted her art.

"Studying Chinese calligraphy taught me a lot about China," she said. "I think I'm going to do an exhibition there next year."

Haiti was an artistic revelation. "Living in that very animistic earth culture gradually shifted my work

from the abstract into the figurative," the artist said. "The beat, the color, the music and the rituals of voodoo had a big impact."

Usually the Ishams' trips involved either his or her career. Travels through India with an exhibition of her art exposed her to Indian culture, to the influence of a guru, to meditation and to the richness of India's ancient scripts. "The imagery there is also very provocative," she said. "There are lots of animal forms and they're wonderful and richly colorful."

In mid-May she'll head to Germany, where a show of her work will open under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency in Cologne. From there she'll continue on with the show to a gallery in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Her husband will go on the Prague trip, she said. After retiring from the foreign service in 1986, he found a new career with the Institute for East West Security Studies in Manhattan, a nonprofit consultant "think tank," Isham explained.

"He'll be working to help establish the process of democratization in Eastern Europe," she said.