Art at the Edge of the Sea
(An Interview with Mrs. Effie Raye (Eeii) Bateman Goff)

Left to right: Sarah Braddy, Eeii Bateman Goff, and Julian Goff converse in front of Eeii's Gallery.

By Sarah and Janet Braddy

Introduction
By Sarah Braddy
Life on the Pamlico

Eeiil’s Little Korners of the World is a fine arts and crafts gallery off the “beaten” path down Highway 264 at 315 Pamlico Street in the small town of Belhaven, NC. Transforming an abandoned filling station into a fine art gallery is what Effie Raye Bateman Goff, better known as Eeiil, has accomplished in this unique “little corner” of our world here in the Pamlico area.

The gallery, owned and operated by Eeiil with help from her husband, Julian, was opened on July 3, 1969. Eeiil not only displays her own art work here but also that of other deserving artists of all ages representing many facets of the visual arts.

On a cool afternoon in December 1996, Eeiil was gracious enough to share her gallery and her knowledge of the art world with us for Life on the Pamlico. At the time of this interview, the gallery had just survived three major hurricanes that not only flooded the town of Belhaven, but also Eeiil’s. The gallery was just getting back into normal operation and many pieces of art were still in the balconies where they were stored above the water levels.

Some of the types of art that we enjoyed during our visit were primitive art works by Ann Bell and some religious icons recently done by Hank Foreman. Both are artists originally from here in the Pamlico area. When asked what her favorite type of art work is, Eeiil said, “Whatever I’m working on at the moment.” When asked if she likes to paint portraits, her reply was “No, I like to paint people. A portrait is something else. That means you make me beautiful or that doesn’t look like me.”

For most of the afternoon, we were entertained not only by what the gallery had to offer, but also by what this gracious lady had to say.

Eeiil: When you get ready, I’ll tell you a little bit about the gallery. You haven’t been in before, have you?

Life: No, ma’am.

Eeiil: [to Sarah]: But you have?

Life: [Sarah]: Yes, ma’am, I had a wedding party here a long time ago.

Eeiil: That’s right. I had your cousin in my art class.

Mr. Goff: Hi! [I’m] Julian Goff. [Mr. Goff, Eeiil’s husband and a very friendly fellow, greeted the Life on the Pamlico staff.] Nice to meet you. Julian Goff. Eeiil thinks she’s going to get royalties [from the sale of the magazine] for the rest of her life!

Life: That’s right! That’s right [all laugh!] Fame and fortune!

Mr. Goff: With outstanding writers it’s a sure thing, isn’t it!

Life: [Sarah]: I think we have a ways to go. [All laugh]!

Life: How long have you had this gallery open?

Eeiil: Twenty-eight years.

Life: [Eeiil told us that originally the shop had been a service station.]

Eeiil: This building was originally a service station, so when I take
you on a tour, we’ll go to the grease pit at the far end and then up in the balcony. You will see we have not taken everything down to put the artwork back in its proper places since Hurricanes Bertha, Fran, and Josephine. After three times, we’re going to wait until the weatherman tells us that he’s sure we’re not going to have any more [flooding] this year.

Life: So you got this place in 1969?

Eeii: The gallery was a service station. It was known as “Hyde Bound Esso.” Hyde Bound had a double meaning. It was not very lucrative and it was on the way to Hyde County [laughter]! Since it was never profitable, we couldn’t do much worse with art work.

Life: Hyde Bound, huh?

Eeii: Hyde Bound. I had the pleasure of naming it. My son was in college when his daddy died. And we didn’t operate the service station. It was operated under other people, Hub’s Reck [a famous restaurant], you have heard of it?

Life: Yes.

Eeii: He had his first café over here in this area [indicating area to the left of the entrance].

Life: Right over in this room here?

Eeii: Yes, and this was the garage. The grease pit is in the far end, and I added the little balcony to have storage. It’s worked very well with a little creative touch here and there. Being grass roots, it doesn’t have to be perfect. And yet it can be as fine as any art
that we can find to put in it. And we have not asked anybody to put anything in here. Instead, they asked me. And that’s not too bad.

One of Eeii’s original pieces is displayed at the gallery.

Life: It certainly isn’t. Who did the actual building, the carpentry? Was it different people?

Eeii: It was built originally by Herbert Snell. His grandson, Bill, is here now. He built it as a service station, but he didn’t keep it very long. My husband was a wholesale distributor of Esso products, and when he died in 1962, I had to take it over. For six years I operated from my office on Main Street while my children were in school. And when my son, Topper Bateman, finished with
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his master’s degree from East Carolina, he moved his mama out of the way [laughter]! No son should have to work with his mother. Anyway, I moved out so he wouldn’t find out I didn’t know more than he. He hand-picked this cypress and 30-foot pilings for me to use in here. My daughter earned her degree in art at ECU, and both of them got married while they were in college. It took a lot of doing for all of us. They have both been helpful.

Life: When did you start painting?

Eeii: I think I was three [laughter].

Life: Where did you go to school?

Eeii: I went to Meredith in Raleigh where I later taught. Then I taught in Winston-Salem at a private school. After that, I began my own school of art in Washington and Belhaven.

Life: When were you teaching at Meredith?

Eeii: I really don’t like to tell dates [all laugh]. I’m just getting ready to celebrate my 60th class anniversary. I had professional art classes in high school for four years, and I received high school credit for the classes. They created the credit for me. I was out of school a couple of years before I went to Meredith. I went on to Winston Salem, taught there, came to Washington, and started a class. Grey Hodges and Elizabeth Shelton [were my students]. I had pretty good representation in Washington.

Life: When you first opened this gallery, were the paintings all yours?

Eeii: I intended for them to be. And my children intended for them to be but people started asking for space in the very beginning. I started out with Henry Pearson, who was in one of the art classes I attended in Kinston. He had moved to New York where he became a professional artist. The North Carolina Museum of Art had invited him to have the first retrospective exhibit of a North Carolinian’s work. I opened Eeii’s with the same exhibit that had been at the North Carolina Museum of Art. He had been doing—what do you call it when you do maps? Topography?

Life: Right.

Eeii: I opened with his work. He had been a topographer, I guess that’s right, in Japan for 17 years. His work was used for military intelligence [during World War II].

Life: What kinds of paintings do you enjoy doing the most? Do you have specific subjects that you like to paint?

Eeii: I bet for ten years I did abstracts at night. During the daytime I did realism. That’s the way my mind works.

Life: That really makes sense, though.

Eeii: There’s so much to see in the day time. At night, you can block some of the reality out and put a light where you want it and nowhere else. I guess that explains it.

Life: Do you prefer one over the other?

Eeii: Whatever I’m doing is what I like best right at the moment. I like to do portraits. No, I don’t.
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Life: You don’t like to do portraits?

Eeii: No, I like to paint people. A portrait is something else. That means: “You make me beautiful,” or “that doesn’t look like me.” You know, “Grandpa’s had his teeth taken out now and he doesn’t look like that.” I’ve brought [a painting of] my little granddaughter down, but I’ve not framed it yet.

A beautiful portrait by Eeii depicts her granddaughter’s wedding day.

Life: Well, if she is anymore attractive than that painting, I don’t know if I could handle it. Do you have an example of abstract paintings?

Eeii: Not too much right now. I’ve been open 28 years, and it’s hard to keep work. And I don’t get time to paint. Now the dandelions are realism back there [pointing to the back wall]. And I have one or two little abstracts. This one [indicating a painting done with oil and a palette knife] is not really very abstract. It’s more nonobjective. That’s the best way I have to explain it. It’s not an actual object, but it stimulates a wave a little. I’m also in sculpture and print-making. I do not do etching but wood blocks and all media.

One of Eeii’s abstracts greets visitors of the gallery.

Life: You do oil and watercolors?

Eeii: And acrylic.
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Life: What do you prefer?

Eeii: Whatever I’m working on at the time. Ah, this [indicating a print] is pencil on unfinished canvas. It is big, about 50 by 56, or something of that sort anyway. I put a big enough price on it that I thought it was safe [from being sold]. That always happens. If you don’t want to sell it, it goes right out. A young couple came in on their sailboat from Cincinnati, and the young man fell in love with it. So his wife took him back to the boat. Then she found a telephone and called me and said, “Hold it. I’m buying it.” It was so big that I had to send it by plane. No truck would take it because of the insurance it had to carry. It cost me $125 to ship it.

Life: [Eeii describes her painting inspired by the space shuttle.]

Eeii: It’s been in my mind a long time. It’s just more or less outer space from the embryo of Mother Earth going out into the darkness. I was inspired by the shuttle exploring space as well as the bubbles that came out in smoke in the shuttle. The first one [space shuttle], I got so excited I would have gone up in it if they had invited me [laugh]! The young men in the drawing had the caps and gowns. You see, they had more freedom in education. The young women had to be helped over the hurdles by the young men. But they are catching up—I hope [chuckle].

Life: Do you think this area around Belhaven, Washington, Beaufort County, and Hyde County is conducive to painting?

Eeii: I think they [the painters here] can do anything anybody else in the world can. I don’t see any difference between New York City and our area creatively speaking.
Life: You think we have, in this area, painters that would compare to those anywhere?

“Outer Space from the Embryo of Mother Earth” is symbolized in Eeii’s work entitled Umbilical Cord.
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Eei: Well, nearly everybody in New York comes from somewhere else [laughter]! And most of them don’t get off the street they live on! Most people prefer to get away from the big cities if they are going to be painters. Georgia O’Keeffe, of course, preferred New Mexico. It’s just New Yorkers who think that’s the only place for art. We don’t all agree with them. There is a new artist who has just moved here from New York State, and she says she has never been so happy. There’s so much to offer here in North Carolina, especially in this area. She can run up to Beaufort County Community College and take an art course and work with other artists. [She doesn’t miss] New York.

Mr. Goff: You wonder why many New Yorkers never go to a show or to see the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty. Because they can go tomorrow, they don’t go today!

Life: [Eei told us that she and her work have been recognized in many authoritative books about art.]

Eei: For instance, this book edited by Charlotte Robinson from Washington, D.C., they say I was the coordinator of a quilt show that she was chair of. Nationally known artists designed the quilts and the people from the grassroots of America made the quilts. Phillip Morris [the tobacco company] has bought them, and they are all in the Phillip Morris Museum in New York City. And this quilt [indicating photo in book] was made by one of our artists from the Belhaven area, Mary Ingalls. We had to go up to New York from time to time, and they came to me in all the planning stages and working stages. They [the quilts] went to Winston-Salem in one of the exhibits. There was an exhibit of the quilts for two years — total shows — from the beginning designs to the
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finished product. We showed in every state in the United States. The nearest exhibit of the show was in Winston-Salem at the Saw Tooth Gallery.

Life: [Eeii escorted us upstairs to show us the paintings of artist David Martin.]

Artwork by David Martin of Raleigh, a retired NC State physics professor, adorns the walls of Eeii's Gallery.

Eeii: Come up here beside me. This is the work of David Martin, who has just retired from teaching physics at [N. C.] State in Raleigh. All of these pieces that I’ve got are out in the air so they can breathe. We make all the pottery or have made all the pottery on the premises until right recently. The mother of Bea Behr who is my potter-in-residence, is feeling poor right now so Bea has taken off a little time. Bea earned an MFA from ECU. For three years we had a young man managing in here, Hank Foreman. He is from the local area. I gave him a three year critique to get him
back in school after he had been out ten years. He just got his master’s degree from Appalachian State and has been accepted at the University of Ohio to continue towards his Ph.D. He is running the Catherine Smith Gallery at Appalachian right now. He just finished these icons [unusually erotic looking angels], which I’m trying to get accustomed to. He said he was going to shock me, and he did [laughter]! And then he brought them in and they’re religious so it did shock me. I guess angels just ain’t what they used to be!

Life: [Eeii pointed out that some of the best local artists are so-called primitives.]

Eeii: We are not snobs. For example, Ann Bell is a primitive painter. She has never studied academically, but she studies all the time on her own, of course.

Life: I notice you have a painting of Saint Thomas Church in Bath?

Eeii: Yes. That’s by Sharon Muir. She has a degree from Carolina [UNC-Chapel Hill] in stage designing and also in fabrics designing. She’s a very prolific artist.

Life: [The “grease pit” of the former service station has been put to a special use.]

Eeii: This is the grease pit here. I have had it full of lights and champagne on ice. I served it on the [old auto] windshield up here. Anyway, we give wedding parties and all sorts of things here. I hang my wine glasses under my windshield at home.

Life: [Upstairs has some low ceiling beams.]

Eeii: You may have to duck; we will see if your radar works. The black sculpture is by a black artist who died sometime ago. He was a French chef in New York City and his wife owned some property here. He said, “If I ever retire, I’m going to cut a tree down and make things.” And that’s one of them.

These little balconies have been a life saver. That’s my husband’s Christmas present [pointing to copier]. I just wrote a check for it yesterday. This one is black and white but our little color one that he’s got back here is the one that I’m going to enjoy. I’m not going to use it, but I’m going to boss it.

Life: You’re going to keep him busy?

Eeii: Yes! There are several books in the making that we’re working on. He’s doing a history of the electrical co-op where he worked for 15 years.

Life: Getting back to the so-called “primitive artists,” do you believe their work is comparable to the more formally trained artists?

Eeii: If it’s worthy, it doesn’t matter who painted it. We are not snobs, but we don’t exhibit anything we don’t think is worthy. Ah, but worthiness is where you find it. Some of these things are primitive, some are folk art. They are untrained but natural painters.

Life: Art seems to be thriving here. So we have a lot of artists right here around Belhaven?


Eeii: We have. I had 54 in my classes when I had my own art school. I took 54 during the week. I couldn’t do more. I was running Bateman Oil Company at that time and you [Sarah] used to pick up your cousin, didn’t you?

Life [Sarah]: He was my brother. He was the one of your students who dropped his painting overboard. Do you remember that?

Eeii: Yes. He stops me ever so often and says, “Do you remember me?” Of course I do. I remember all of them. There were ten boys to one girl that took art every year and I taught them from the first grade through high school at my studio. I had 54 students, and I still taught after I opened this; but it became more than I could handle so I had to stop teaching. Every Fourth of July we have our “Twilight Hour” in here. I feel like I’ve been mashed like a powder puff! They all come back and hug me and tell me how much they use the art they learned in the things that they’re doing now. I’m sorry, I think I should turn the talking back over to you.

Life: No, no!

Life: [Eeii told us how she discussed art with young school children.]

Eeii: I’ve had about 25,000 school children on guided tours, and, oh, I was in love with talking, you know. I always had the children come in and sit down on the floor. And I sat up there and talked to them about things, before they saw them. [The children had their eyes closed.] Then I gave them permission to touch; and I had them rub their hair, rub their clothes, their shoes, the rug with their eyes closed. Then I asked them if they could tell what they were touching from the feel of the object. I explained about blind people and that their eyes were fingers. And they were so excited when I said, “Now that you’ve tuned your fingers up for touching, I want you to feel things but don’t go anywhere else and do it or they’ll have a fit!” Anyway, one of the boys started waving his hand and I said, “Just a minute.” I finished my talk and then said, “What did you want to say?” He said, “You done gone and talked him to sleep!” A little boy had crawled under a table, a first grader, and gone to sleep. But I have never had children to break things. And now young people bring their children in who came when they were little and I have given them “touch privileges.” They bring their children in to get “touch privileges” because it meant so much to them when they were little. It really works. I have to hit a grandpa or grandma sometimes or a mama if they won’t leave them alone and let me work with them. But it’s been very gratifying. They’ll tell me about it now after 27, 28 years. It’s “proof of the pudding.”

Life: If you had it to do over again, would you do anything different in your career?

Eeii: I consider that I’ve been very fortunate. I’ve had no money so I’ve had opportunities offered that I would never have learned about if I had had money. I had wonderful help mates. My daughter thinks I wasted my talent, but I think it’s been a very, very satisfying life.

Life: Sounds like it has been to me. So you wouldn’t have done anything different?

Eeii: No.

Life: Your customers come from all over the place?
Eei: All over the world. We’re on the Intracoastal Waterway. The big boats come. We ship their Christmas presents for them. We’ve had somebody from every state in the union. Some ten years ago, maybe more than that, a lady was in here with a guest and she asked what states [were we missing visitors from], and I said, “Alaska and Hawaii.” And she said, “Wait a minute, wait a minute.” And the lady visitor went to the door and called, “Honey, come in here.” And Honey came in, and she said, “Tell the lady where you were born.” And he said, “Hawaii.” And she said, “Tell the lady where I was born.” And he said, “Alaska.” I thought it just couldn’t be! But that is typical! We have some boats from foreign countries. We have a Canadian Cruiseliner that comes in that does a trip around the world and they come in every two years. I guess it takes that long to get around. But we’re not on the “beaten” track. We are not a tourist related place; people usually know where they are coming when they come here and they’ve made arrangements. For many years, Stanford University in California arranged a tour, a geography and geology boat tour, that starts on our northern Intracoastal Waterway and goes on to Florida, I believe. They called or wrote to me three or four months in advance and wanted to make arrangements for me to be open when they came through Beaufort. And whatever time they came, we were more than happy to do so. We knew their names. Then I got a letter, and the captain said, “I’ve retired from that particular job, but I’m going to be traveling just the same, so I’ll see you again. But I did want you to know we enjoyed it over the years.” He didn’t have to write. So it’s been as good as I have tried to make it.

Conclusion
By Janet Braddy

Spending an afternoon at Eei’s Little Korners of the World proved to be thought-provoking and educational while at the same time entertaining. The painting “Umbilical Cord” was a swirled “cloud” full of bubbles and people. Speaking with Eei, I learned that the world was the mother and space the father. The swirls contained bubbles that contained scenes of people’s lives. That’s a unique way of looking at things. On the other hand, in a group of three icons made by Hank Freeman, I didn’t find them all attractive, but interesting. They each had a religious symbol contained in them while an array of colors and fabrics and “things” were all around them. When they are examined carefully, one can see different images in the icons.

Exploring small and unique places is most often one of the most pleasurable experiences in life. Learning new information about the things you enjoy is what gives life a little spice. Eei’s gives its visitors a variety of things to see and learn. When you stop by, Eei will be glad to tell you anything you want to know about the collection there, whether it is about a painting on the wall or the windshield used as a display accessory. We found out that Eei’s Little Korners of the World is just what the name implies. Many of the “little corners” of the art world are represented in this gallery.
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Left to right” Julian Goff, Eeiii Goff, and journalism student Sarah Braddy share a laugh at Eeii’s Little Korners of the World.

If you find time on your hands and long for a fulfilling experience, come and enjoy a taste of Southern hospitality and the beauty of culture found here in this corner of the Pamlico area. Paintings, crafts, books, and personalities can all be found at Eeii’s. Whether you’re looking for a mantle piece or a peaceful Sunday afternoon adventure, stop by Eeii’s and discover this unique “corner” that we so enjoy.

Come visit the gallery at the edge of the sea. You will find a radiating warmth that surrounds Eeii as you speak with her. At first glance, Eeii portrays the “grandmotherly” type, but after exchanging a few words with her, you will find an educated artist who will gladly help you explore the world of art.