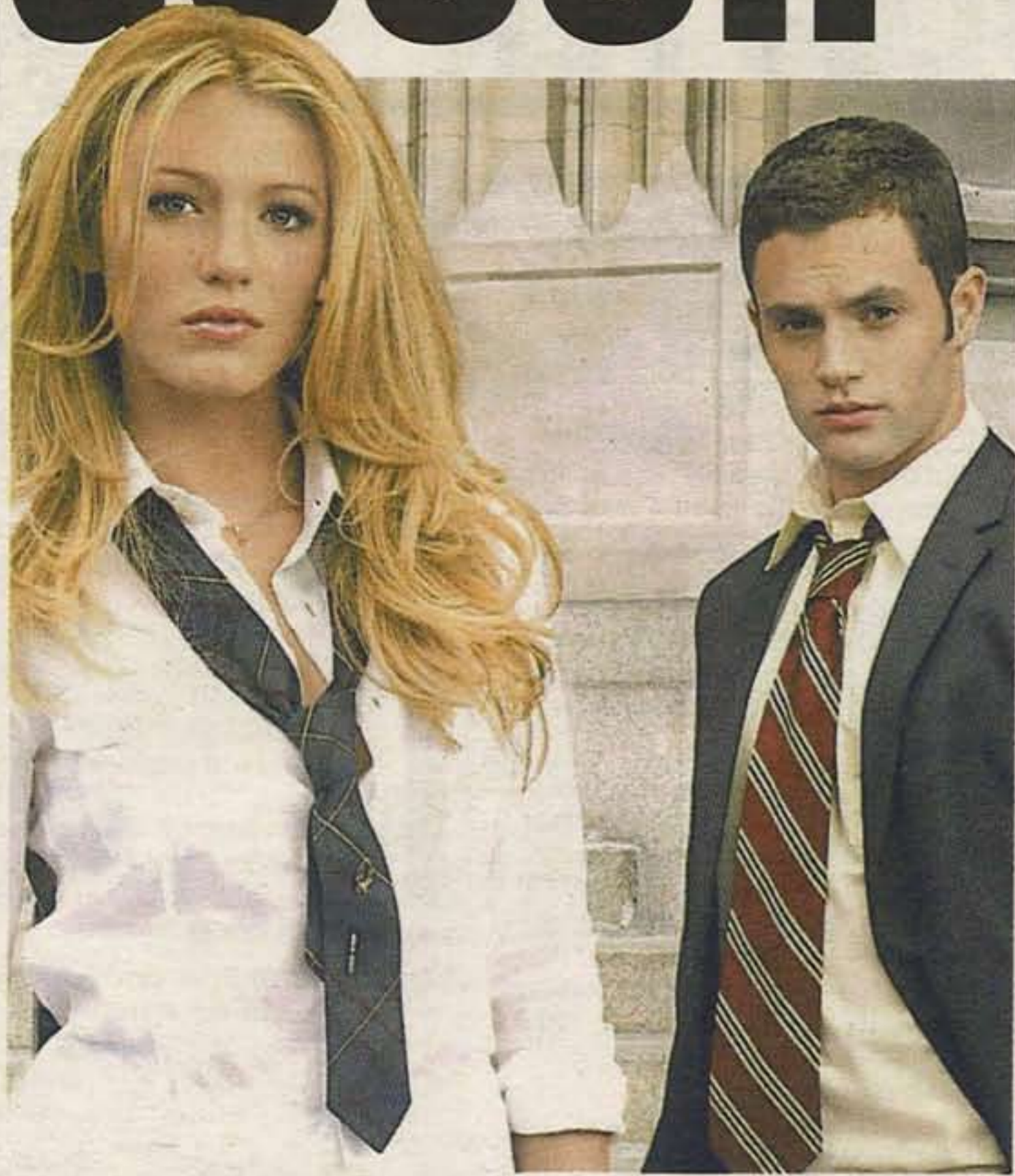


GOSSIP SWIRLS



HIP TO BE SQUARE: A painting by Forest Hills artist Rita Wilmers (bottom right) is featured (above right) on the snooty TV show "Gossip Girl," starring Blake Lively and Penn Badgley.

OMG! Snarky teen show artist is 60, from Queens

By PAULA ROTH

Behind the scenes of salacious hookups and high jinks of spoiled rich Manhattan teens on TV's "Gossip Girl" is someone the show's characters might sneer at — a 60-year-old painter from the decidedly unhip outer boroughs.

The swirling watercolors featured in the CW hit are the work of artist Rita Wilmers — a retired fashion designer who has quietly channeled her love of the arts into a second career from her home in Forest Hills, Queens.

One of Wilmers' paintings, "Three of Hearts," was the focus of an episode in October and it makes a reappearance in tonight's episode, "Hi, Society," in which boho mom and artist Alison Humphrey has an opening at her hipster husband Rufus' Brooklyn art gallery.

"Three of Hearts' marks the end of one part of my life — my

32 years on Staten Island — and the beginning of a new life in Forest Hills and a new [more abstract] art style," Wilmers said. "It's a celebration of having lived on Staten Island, saying goodbye, and moving on."

Not exactly the type of sentiment the catty teens on the show might appreciate.

But the work made its way from the quiet, tree-lined Queens streets into one of TV's edgiest series after catching the eye of set decorator Christina Tonkin, whose job it is to rent such props.

"I like to use work from local artists," Tonkin said, explaining how she rented 24 paintings from Wilmers to serve as Humphrey's "ghost art."

The expressionist piece depicts three figures in vivid, primary hues riding a bicycle on top of the world.

Describing what drew her to



Michael Sofronski

Wilmers, Tonkin said, "I love the colors and mythical quality. I feel as if I'm looking at a fairy tale about to be told."

Wilmers says the relationship suits her fine.

"Some of my work I'd never sell, it's too close to my heart. By renting, I get it back," Wilmers said. Wilmers belongs to the non-profit Queens Council on the Arts (QCA). Artists enroll for about \$40, then post bios and images on HCA's Web site.

Another QCA artist whose work appears on "Gossip Girl" is 54-year-old Ukrainian-born Mikhail Gubin, a Kew Gardens resident. In his oil paintings — part of

a semi-abstract New York landscape series — curving lines and textured paint capture the city's breathless energy.

Gubin didn't feel compromised by renting.

"I'm excited about the process of creating. Art is always commercial, to a certain extent, because we sell. But if I wanted to make money I would do something else."

Vivian Warfield, director of QCA's Community Arts Fund, is amazed.

"Who would've believed a bunch of snotty little Upper East Side kids would give exposure to mature, seasoned artists?"