

Interview with an Artist

Mary Whyte



Lovers
26 1/2 x 27 1/8

Mary Whyte has rightfully gained national recognition for her figurative watercolors. She paints every day moments that slip away. Both her approach to watercolor technique and her subjects seem to rely strongly on timing.

For the past 20 years, Mary has been driven to capture South Carolina's personal history before it changes with the times. Most noted for her depictions of the African-American Gullah women of Johns Island, South Carolina, near where she lives, in recent years Whyte has turned her attention to paintings of southern laborers.

Specifically, she captures the soul of the south, but we recognize something in her work that puts us in touch in a meaningful way with ourselves.

I'm thrilled to share this interview with one of my favorite watercolorists with you.

Charlene Collins Freeman

To introduce you to our readers, please tell me a little bit about your background and how you got started.

I grew up in rural northeastern Ohio and was in the eighth grade when I sold my first piece. It was a pen and ink drawing of a hotel and bar that was across the street from a relative's house where I was staying one summer. My aunt offered to take the drawing over to the establishment's owner, and after thirty minutes she returned and put twenty dollars in my hand. I can still remember my surprise and exhilaration that someone might actually pay me to draw something!

Later, when I turned eighteen I had my first solo show at a small venue in our home town. I sold a few paintings, and it was then that I made the decision to make my life and living as an artist. It is a choice that would bring me an abundance of blessings. Through painting I have had the good fortune to travel to many parts of our country and the world, and have garnered many lifelong friendships. To be able to spend one's life describing God's beauty is something that I am grateful for every day.

After high school I studied at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where I met my future husband Smith Coleman during the first week of classes. Most of the classes offered in school were in acrylic or oil painting, since watercolor was still considered a lightweight medium. A few years later I spent a glorious year studying in Rome, Italy, before finishing up with a BFA and teaching certification.

Ultimately, I had to learn how to paint in watercolor on my own: by experimenting, going to museums, and studying the techniques of great artists such as John Singer Sargent, Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth, all of whose work I still greatly admire. Other artists have inspired my work as well, particularly Bonnard and Klimt for their images that employ strong design and patterns. It was Klimt's work that first prompted me to use quilts in my paintings—a motif I have returned to over and over again for more than thirty years.

I have always been a figurative painter. In high school I did watercolor portraits of close friends who were willing to pose for me. To earn money, I advertised pencil portraits for twenty dollars in the local newspaper. A few folks brought their children to pose for me, which was good practice working from life.

Interview with an Artist

Mary Whyte



Red
18 1/2 x 18 1/2



Twirl
18 1/2 x 18 1/2

I also began doing paintings of the Ohio Amish, and would often take my mother's car on Sundays to paint plein-air in the farming communities an hour's drive from our home. I had no easel, so I would sit on the ground to work. After I graduated from art school I started doing portrait commissions in earnest. I discovered that I loved painting people, and especially enjoyed the opportunity of getting to meet a variety of folks from different backgrounds.

In 1991 my husband and I made the decision to pack up our house and gallery and move from Philadelphia to Charleston, South Carolina. It was a complete leap of faith moving to an area where we had only a handful of friends and no business connections. We knew we would be completely restarting our gallery and our lives, but it turned out to be a fortuitous decision.

Shortly after moving to Johns Island I met a group of senior Gullah women who would change my life and art in profound and unexpected ways. I began doing paintings of the women, and over twenty years later I am still painting these remarkable people and their families. From them I have learned many valuable life lessons, which I cherish. The women have led me to a life of gratitude, and from them I have learned that rich abundance can be found in the simplest of means.

Ten years after I started painting the women, a book of my Gullah paintings called *Alfreda's World* was printed to coincide with a museum exhibition and, ten years after that, the publication of *Down Bohicket Road* followed.

What is your process? When do you paint and how do you structure your time?

The tools that I use to paint with are basic: brushes, pigment and water. I have very rarely used aids such as masking fluid or an atomizer, since I feel they can give the painting a mechanical or overly polished look. I rely on only a few different brushes: my #8 kolinsky round, a one and a half inch petit gris cat's tongue brush, as well as a variety of large kolinsky and synthetic flats. The watercolor paint that I use is M. Graham & Company, and my paper of choice is 300 pound Arches cold press.

I treat my studio time as seriously as I would any job—eight hours a day, five days a week. A few times a year I rent a studio far away from home so that I can paint for up to twelve hours a day, and really focus on a body of work without interruptions.

Of course, folks often ask how long it takes me to complete one painting. I never count the hours, because then I wouldn't be concentrating on the act of creating. That being said, the large paintings might take up to a few weeks to complete, with one in four watercolors being torn up along the way.

Students are often surprised to learn I destroy many of my works, but I do. Usually the reason I am dissatisfied is because the work got muddled—which is often the result of not having a clear enough concept thought out in advance. The destroyed paintings aren't viewed as failures, but are considered as studies. One painting leads to the next.

Interview with an Artist

Mary Whyte

How do you define success

Personal success is difficult to define, because it is something most often gauged by others. I try not to worry about success, since being concerned with accolades can derail creativity.

For me, I am happiest when I feel I am getting better as a painter and able to express my ideas more fully. To do this requires hard work, and nothing else. No previous successes can guarantee that the next painting will work.

In our early years as artists we paint like those whose work we admire. We copy, explore, emulate and grow. Eventually our paintings begin to look like us. This is what is called achieving one's personal style—when our paintings look as if no one else could have possibly created them except us alone.

To get to this point can take years -- and hundreds, if not thousands, of paintings.

It is a constant struggle, because once the artist has achieved a level of understanding, he or she will soon discover there are more hills to climb.

And so this is the common dilemma all artists face: do I move forward?



Absolution
33 1/2 x 28 1/2



Persimmon
40 3/4 x 28 3/4



Fifteen Minute Break
58 x 38 3/4

Not climbing those hills results in doing a safe version of the same painting over and over again. Going forward means taking chances and risking failure.

The journey for artists wanting to grow and become better painters never gets any easier, but it does get more satisfying.

In the end, we leave behind evidence of a life well lived.

Interview with Mary Whyte
by Charlene Collins Freeman
Feature Editor, Hot Press

www.marywhyte.com

Watercolor artist Mary Whyte is a teacher and author whose figurative paintings have earned national recognition.

A resident of Johns Island, South Carolina, Whyte garners much of her inspiration from the Gullah descendants of coastal Carolina slaves, who number among her most prominent subjects. Whyte's paintings

have been featured in International Artist, Artist, American Artist, American Art Collector and numerous other publications, and were the subject of a feature segment on CBS Sunday Morning.

Whyte is the author of five books, including most recently Down Bohicket Road, Working South and Painting Portraits and Figures in Watercolor. This fall a 250 page biography called More Than a Likeness: The Enduring Art of Mary Whyte will be published to coincide with an exhibition of her watercolors at the Butler Institute of American Art, in Youngstown, OH, September 8 - November 24, 2013. Another exhibition featuring Whyte's watercolors will open on November 7, 2013 at the National Arts Club in New York City.

In 2014, Whyte will have workshops in Walnut Creek, CA, Chatham, MA, Victoria BC, Canada, and in the Tuscany region of Italy. Her work can be found at Coleman Fine Art in Charleston, South Carolina, where her husband, Smith Coleman, manages the gallery and makes gilded and carved frames.