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Literal Abstraction

Painter Patrick McCay brings mystery and imagination to New England's most iconic scenes

WRITTEN BY LORI FERGUSON • PHOTOGRAPHED BY JARED CHARNEY

Explore, Exploit — Express!” is the title of a popular continuing-education course that painter Patrick McCay teaches at the New Hampshire Institute of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire, where he is chairman of fine arts and senior faculty fellow, but this verbal triumvirate could be McCay’s motto. A native of Scotland, the artist has lived all over the world, from Detroit to Australia. Yet, it’s his time in New England that informs his most recent body of work, a series of canvases that reflect upon the region’s rich visual narrative while playfully challenging conceptions of what constitutes a traditional landscape.

On a recent sabbatical from academic duties, McCay gave in to the seduction of scenic New England. “I drove around the countryside and saw sheep and cows with the light bouncing off their backs,” he says,

THE ARTWORK IN Patrick McCay’s studio (ABOVE) reflects his approach to painting. “I often don’t know what my conclusion will be when I begin work on a canvas,” he says. “I do choose a dominant image and have a sense of the palette I’ll employ, but I have no idea how the piece will turn out until it’s done.”

ART



INSPIRED BY THE natural environment, McCay paints in his Bedford, New Hampshire, studio. "In order to push myself beyond what's obvious and easily visible," he says, "I come inside. Being within the walls of my studio forces me to focus on content and a concept that fully engages my imagination."

"and the inspiration was obvious." A graduate of the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland, McCay is classically trained and fully cognizant of the underlying elements that constitute an image. But literal representation is not his goal. "I set out to revisit New England's icons — deer, moose, barns, boats, trees, fields, and farms — and re-create them in new and inventive ways," he says. "The challenge was clear: Could I employ clichés in inventive, painterly visual statements, imposing the dignity and mystery of the unknown upon that which is all too well known?"

The resulting work offers a delightful romp through New England's visual Rolodex, prompting the question: What's a landscape painting really about? For this artist, a traditional approach is much too staid. The real world has a place in his paintings, but it will never be slavishly reproduced.

McCay paints in his studio in Bedford, New Hampshire, rather than *en plein air*, because for him, painting is as much a cere-



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bral exercise as a representational one. “As an artist, I follow a process that I describe as ‘inside working out/outside working in,’” he says. “I’m constantly in observational mode. I engage the landscape *outside* — absorbing, documenting, reflecting — then bring these experiences *inside*, where the cognitive creative translation begins.”

A good painting, like a great book or film, makes you want to revisit it, says McCay. “For me, the thrill of creating means getting beyond the obvious and what everyone else sees into a deeper, more evocative and emotional space.” Remove the external stimuli, he explains, and you’re forced to use your imagination to fill in the blanks. “When I’m out exploring, I’ll do cursory sketches to capture rudimentary information about the envi-

ANIMALS SUCH AS deer and cattle are recognizable in McCay’s paintings, but they are not scrupulously rendered. “If I find a poor photo — one that’s out of focus, for instance — I’ll grab it. Too much specificity dilutes the creative process for me.”



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ART



MCCAY UNDERPAINTS HIS CANVASES in acrylic, which dries quickly, allowing him to sketch out an idea, and overpaints in oil, which enables him to infuse a tactile element. The effect is powerfully demonstrated in the 40-by-30-inch *Horse Glimpses* (ABOVE) and the 36-inch-by-36-inch *Sheep Glimpses iv* (FACING PAGE).

ronment, but I deliberately avoid making detailed recordings of the scene in order to maximize the opportunity for painterly invention.” He adds, “The object in my work, for example, the moose or the fish, isn’t the dominant element. The rest of the painting has to be equally engaging. I may include a more formal object as an element within an image, but that’s countered by an expressionistic background. My goal is to find a way to make the literal and the abstract compatible.”

Color is also important in carrying his form and message. It’s an emotional, inventive component of every painting he executes, and yet it’s another means the artist employs for moving beyond the obvious. “My training taught me how to orchestrate color palettes,” he says, “so I turn away from literal renderings of a subject and instantly the choices for depicting [it] become broader, more inventive, and more challenging.”

A perfect illustration of this melding of the real and imagined is his large canvas *Cow Glimpses II*. The upper third of the image depicts a common New England scene of Holstein cows grazing in a meadow. But as the viewer’s eye slides down the canvas, this bucolic landscape takes a startling turn. The meadow explodes in a fragmented collection of stripes and squiggles in bright, primary colors, with only a few daisies scattered along one side to suggest the peaceful pasture above. Farther down the plane, the eye lands on a butcher’s dia-



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gram for cattle. What is McCay's message? Don't be lulled into a sense of false security by superficial appearances? Don't assume that things are necessarily as they appear? Or perhaps, simply, that our relationship with the world around us is multifaceted.

"Patrick is a painter's painter," says Zoe Randall, who as owner and director of the Chace-Randall Gallery in Andes, New York, has represented McCay for many years. "His work reflects a melding of sophistication and whimsy as well as a peppering of iconography that simultaneously reflects the landscape of both his interior and exterior environment. His use of color is extraordinary. At first glance, it appears to border on the extreme, but with close inspection, one realizes it's perfect."

"I simply can't play it safe when I paint," says McCay. "The work has to occupy that uneasy space between real and unreal. I don't seek to re-create what's before me — that would be too mechanical for me. Instead, I like to absorb the experience and editorialize, distilling it through my memory in hopes of achieving something a tad more original. My goal is to encourage viewers to revisit the familiar and suspend their own visual for someone else's. I also believe, however, that you have to leave the viewer with residual clues to enable access to the work. As my own father once said, 'You can write about art, you can fight about art, but if you're not communicating, you've failed.'" ■

❶ Patrick McCay's work is available locally through Mill Brook Gallery & Sculpture Garden, 236 Hopkinton Road, Concord, NH; 603-226-2046; themillbrookgallery.com.

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