

## A Few Words From Down Under

**Editor's Note:** Judith McGrath contributed her writings about exhibits and events taking place in Western Australia to *Carolina Arts* for about a decade. Although she was writing about events taking place thousands and thousands of miles away, they seemed relevant to what was going on here in the Carolinas. Her contributions were very popular when we first ran them and continue to be popular on our website's archives. We've decided to revisit them from time to time.

### A Few Words From Down Under on Paintings & Pictures

by Judith McGrath, first run in our Feb. 2005 issue

A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine politely complained about one of my art reviews by kindly pointing out where both the artist and I went wrong. He informed me that certain details in paintings depicting Australian Outback life were rendered incorrectly, therefore my praise of the artwork was unjustified. As I often give 'constructive criticism' I thought it's only fair to accept the same when offered in return and perhaps learn from my mistakes.

I remembered the exhibition and that the work, although not my preference in art, was good so I checked it out. Rereading my commentary revealed the verbal applause was for the artist's painting ability, not his subject matter. It seems my critic and I viewed the work from different perspectives; he was looking at the 'picture' and measuring it against 'reality' while I was looking at the 'painting' and assessing it as 'art'.

I called the friend who critiqued my review and defended my opinion by saying that although the artist paints in a realistic style, he is not depicting reality. The artist is a Myth Maker who idealises a bygone era and the imagery refers more to late 19th Century Bush Ballads than early 21st Century reality. I lectured on about how painters manipulate the artistic vocabulary (line, shape, colour, etc) in the same way poets play with words. My job as an art critic is to evaluate how the artist uses this vocabulary to communicate via the painting, an approach that often renders the picture superfluous. This righteous argument mollified my friend who confessed he didn't know much about art but he knew what he liked.

The above exchange started me thinking about how people see art. Do they look at the picture or the painting? Seek the real or the imagined? Do they judge pictorial images by rules of reality or constructs of art? All of the above. When Nadar's camera made nice pictures, some prophesised painting would disappear. But it didn't. Instead it was reinvented via such Modernist movements as Impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, etc. Released from the constraints of having to make a picture, artists were free to create a painting. But with freedom comes responsibility so while the Modernists folded space and fractured the picture plane, they maintained references to an image. And they continued to employ the vocabulary of art while creating a new phraseology. Unfortunately, Post-Modernists discarded all imagery and pushed the artistic vocabulary well beyond definition in their effort to secure complete freedom. Soon each component of painting - medium, technique, texture - became an end in itself. The result is that today art and artists can't distinguish between 'freedom' and 'abandonment'.

The fact is confirmed in graduate exhibitions. The last grad show I attended, recipients of Bachelor of Fine Arts [Paint-

ing] presented thirty, non-pictorial exhibits. About six used paint, one had wavy lines carved into a four-inch thick slab of built up acrylic paint. The other two dozen efforts included installations, electronic presentations and digital prints. It was obvious these students had been abandoned, they didn't know the basic vocabulary of art much less how to play with artistic phrases. To prove the point, one graduate manipulated the computer software very well but was not shown how to use the 'spell check'. The sad thing is these new grads assume their degree grants them the freedom to do as they please and call it Art. But freedom involves responsibility and somewhere along the way that concept was lost.

The contemporary crap offered and accepted by today's art world leaves the student and the viewing public confused between painting as an 'art' and painting as a 'job'. Is the painter an 'artist' or a 'practitioner'? Some galleries pick up recent grads, refer to them as The New Best Thing, put high prices on their student efforts and secure invitations for them to participate in Big Bucks art prize exhibitions. They're considered 'lucky' by their peers. But are they? I recall one New Best Thing who was invited to exhibit in a prestigious acquisition exhibition. He was thrilled to have won First Prize as it meant his work would enter a major collection. He considered his future was secure, so wasn't too flustered when, during the acceptance of his prize on the opening night, pieces of his exhibit fell to the floor. He uttered some excuse about the glue not having had time to set properly. As he'd just received \$15,000 he was able to repair the exhibit but not his relationship with his agent. The experience taught him two valuable lessons; 1) be responsible for your art, and 2) there's always another New Best Thing on the horizon. (PS. Since the first blush faded, he is proving to be a fine sculptor.)

It's lack of responsibility about producing and promoting art that has us wondering what we should look for when buying art - the Painting, the Picture, or the Price. One would hope all three but that's not always the case. To some who don't know much about art or aren't sure what they like, the price is all they can relate to. Some years back, a local high flyer in this town purchased Van Gogh's Irises and put it on public display. I was entranced by the rich texture of the painting and moved by the picture of a lone white flower, standing firm against a surging tide of violent blue blooms and sharp blades of green leaves. Tears formed in my eyes, not only from my response to the artwork but from people all around me whispering; "He paid six million for that!"

When you consider the art world today, the average buyer should be concerned with the painting, the picture and the price. My friend went to an exhibition of new work by an artist of international high standing with the idea of buying a 'good' painting. A painting about a subject he knows, a picture he would enjoy viewing for a long time, at a price he could afford. But he couldn't justify paying out for a painting he didn't understand because the picture was wrong. He knows the true beauty of the Outback and didn't appreciate it being misrepresented.

Whenever I think the art world has abandoned the viewing public, or believe the viewing public is abandoning art, something happens to restore my faith in it all. In this case it was my friend. Although he couldn't analyse it, he knew something wasn't right with the exhibits. It wasn't so much that the pictorial detail was 'incorrect' or that the painting was 'bad', it

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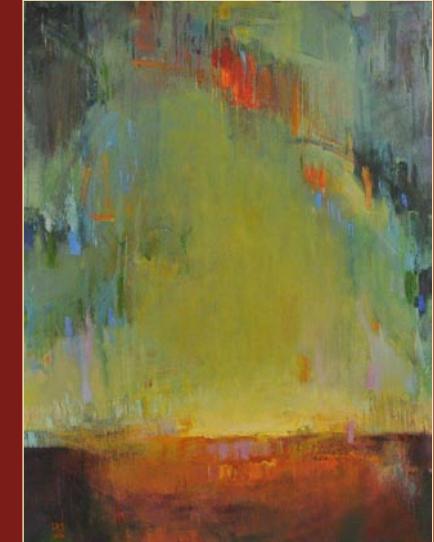
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William Halsey

wasn't even the price. He wouldn't accept the artist abandoning truth for the sake of selling an ideal. And if he couldn't explain it in the 'artistic' vocabulary, he could see it and wouldn't buy it. Good for him!

The art world doesn't need more freedom; it needs more exacting art buyers, like my friend, who demand well-made works of honest art. This will force art schools to instruct students in the responsibility that goes with creative freedom and the use of an artistic vocabulary along with all the other tools of the trade. There is no need to abandon expression or abstraction in art however, there is the need for artists to assure their visual communication is accessible to the viewer. Another look at my review revealed how, as an art critic, I felt free to dismiss the picture because it didn't interest me. I was

wrong. My friend's constructive criticism reminded me that no aspect of the painting or the picture should be considered superfluous to the art. Thanks mate.

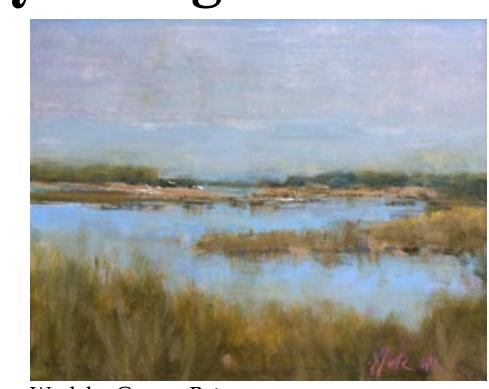
Judith McGrath lives in Kalamunda, Western Australia, 25 minutes east of Perth. She received a BA in Fine Art and History from the University of Western Australia. McGrath lectured in Art History and Visual Literacy at various colleges around the Perth area, and was an art reviewer for *The Sunday Times* and *The Western Review* both published in the Perth area. McGrath was also a freelance writer and reviewer for various art magazines in Australia. She also co-ordinated the web site *Art Seen in Western Australia* found at (<http://www.artseeninwa.com>). McGrath is currently enjoying retirement.

## The Wells Gallery at The Sanctuary Resort on Kiawah Island, SC, Features Works by George Pate

The Wells Gallery at The Sanctuary Resort on Kiawah Island, SC, is featuring works by George Pate, on view from Aug. 1-31, 2013.

Pate was a resident of the Southeast since 1957, and Santa Fe, NM, since 1977, where he found ample subject matter. This intrigue has motivated him to move to Beaufort, SC, and become a full time resident of the Lowcountry. Using his Southwestern influenced color palette, he now embraces the light and colors that the Lowcountry has to offer.

Pate works en plein air to render light, shade, and shadow with a strong design, vital color and thoughtful brush strokes. He evokes both realism and impressionism in his canvases and consistently displays his understanding of the invention and the presence of emotion. He fully inhabits each landscape he paints, extracting the essence that resides in the soul of the land, and releasing its poetry onto the surface of his canvas.



Work by George Pate

Pate was born and grew up in Michigan, spending summers on his uncle's farm in Canada. His long journey as a painter began at age two when he received his first easel. While in the Air Force, he traveled to Japan and the Pacific. A born teacher, he makes his knowledge of painting available to students at all levels and has led innumerable paint-

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