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REAL LIFE *Reflections* with Laurin McCracken

BY AMY TAYLOR

“**W**ithout reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.” While this notable quote refers to life, the significance of reflection also abounds in the art of watercolorist Laurin McCracken, who has recently returned home to an area renowned for its artistic genius, the Mississippi Delta. An architect, photographer and artist, McCracken is a relative newcomer to the world of watercolor, a technique-driven art form that is perfectly suited to McCracken’s natural eye for detail. In addition to his florals and landscapes, realism also resounds throughout his still life paintings. In particular he has truly mastered the art of capturing the intricate, reflective qualities of silver and crystal in his work.

“I grew up in small towns in Mississippi. Here, in the Deep South, there is a wonderful sense of importance of culture: writing, painting, theater and art in general,” comments McCracken, who attended Auburn University and later received a B.A. and a Bachelor of Architecture from Rice University and a master’s in Architecture and Urban Planning from Princeton. McCracken began a 40-year career as head of marketing for some of the largest architectural/engineering firms in the country.

Twelve years ago, while living in Alexandria, Virginia, he began painting. “I just decided that I wanted art in my life again. I seem to have been born with the ability to draw; anything I can see or imagine, I draw. I had always carried sketchbooks with me, but I never really knew anything about watercolors,” he explains. He enrolled in classes under Gwen Bragg, who taught the basic



“Delta Sky”



“Reflections in Pewter”



McCracken's process begins with carefully arranging his still life, extensively photographing the subject, drawing the image and then masking the shapes. He paints dark backgrounds before creating his reflective technique on the silver and crystal objects.

“One of the great truisms about painting realism is that the more detailed the drawing, the better the painting and the more realistic the appearance of the objects.”

techniques of the British school of transparent watercolor. Several years later after having launched his watercolor career, he visited with Bragg, who offered McCracken the highest compliment saying, “The student is now teaching the teacher.” McCracken adds, “I believe that my architectural training, as well as my photography, gave me a good eye for composition, design, balance value, detail and the other many elements that go into making good architecture as well as good painting.”

Influenced by the Dutch and Flemish still life painters of the 16th and 17th centuries, McCracken has invented a technique that mirrors the reflective attributes of silver and crystal in watercolor. His remarkable process is widely acclaimed and has been published in periodicals throughout the country. He has received countless awards nationally, as well as internationally. McCracken, whose work can be found in numerous galleries across the country, is a signature member of more than a dozen watercolor societies, including the American Watercolor Society and the National Watercolor Society. While he continues to serve as a consultant in the corporate world of architecture, Leland is fortunate that McCracken has settled in his childhood home as he launches the next stage of his vibrant life.

“Through the medium of watercolor, I interpret the world as I see it,” says McCracken. “I have spent a lifetime observing and seeing the details. While I view things as a photographer, as a painter I am able to use the medium as a tool to express my

perspective. One of my goals is to help people see everyday things in a new light.” According to McCracken, there are three basic aspects of becoming a painter: you must be able to see things in a fresh way, you must realize that drawing is fundamental in all art, and you must work to become a master of your craft. He explains, “Not every painter can see things uniquely, but it is imperative that

a painter see things differently and with a certain degree of clarity that the average eye might not see. That is the value we bring to our craft. It is the combination of those abilities and a fundamental mastery of the craft that makes us artists.” He continues, “I am very much in the learning stages of becoming a watercolorist. I began with flowers, then still lifes, and I have most recently added landscapes, seascapes and cloudscapes. All the while I am constantly learning new techniques.”

Nestled on the banks of Leland's historic Deer Creek, from his Leland studio—a place as immaculately organized and detailed as his

paintings—McCracken reflects, “When you've been away from a place like Mississippi for such a long time, you appreciate the heritage of Mississippi artists. There's a certain cachet of being an artist from Mississippi, and it's wonderful to be back in the heart of that artistic culture.”

McCracken's “Visual Abundance” exhibit will debut on January 6 and will run through February 8 at the E.E. Bass Cultural Arts Center in Greenville. Visit www.lauringallery.com or www.greenville-arts-council.com. DU



“Crystal and Silver with Magnolia”