

MIKE MCCONNELL: PAINTINGS, DRAWINGS, AND CONSTRUCTIONS

LESLIE KING HAMMOND, PHD Senior Fellow, Robert W. Deutsch Foundation

"MIKE McCONNELL'S JOURNEY to becoming a fine art painter began with his early training as an illustrator and graphic designer. More than thirty years of freelance commissions honed and refined his skills, whet his appetite, and challenged him to pursue his deeper passion. In the last five years, he has produced a prolific body of work. McConnell deftly utilizes the technical processes he learned as an illustrator and designer to create vibrant colors, textures, patterns, and constructed forms that function as paintings but can also be manipulated into sculptural installations or narratives in the art journals he also creates. For McConnell, this exhibition is an opportunity to present a range of works that speak to his deep passion for and love of painting and drawing.

McConnell's imagery is drawn from his observations of people, places, and activities, often in nature. He creates remarkable scenarios of common occurrences by using bold color contrasts, patterns, lines, and textures. McConnell uses a combination of cutting; tearing; collaging; scribbling; and scratching the surface of his handmade wood panels, paper, or found materials, which results in compositions that vibrate with visual energies that excite the eye and the imagination. Each work celebrates commonplace events that, under his technical prowess, become extraordinary interpretations of the environments in which we all live—and often take for granted, thereby missing the beauty, meaning, and importance of the ordinary.

McConnell was educated at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and studied with Raoul Middleman, Peter Collier, Anne Tabachnick, Abby Sangiamo, and John Sparks, skillfully accomplished painters and printmakers who provided a rigorous training in the classical beaux arts genres of drawing, painting, and printmaking. After graduating in 1975, McConnell found a productive career as a freelance illustrator, which required him to work alone on his commissions. As the demand for illustrators declined and his desire to challenge himself to explore new artistic terrain increased, he began to feel the need to be among a community of artists where he could interact, share ideas, and be inspired by artists working in different genres. In 2015 McConnell was among the first group of artists in residence in the Motor House, an arts hub located in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District of Baltimore. His studio overlooked Graffiti Alley, which offered a steady infusion of ever-changing street art. McConnell was a critical member of this community, which continues to inspire his creativity and propel his artistic vision to new frontiers of exploration and invention."

The journey to becoming an artist is almost as curious and interesting as the work an artist creates. Understanding that journey can illuminate the intent of the artist's imagery and bring viewers an awareness of the issues and experiences that have driven the artist to create. The following conversation provides a glimpse into McConnell's journey as an artist.

LESLIE KING HAMMOND | Please tell me about your earliest memories that inspired your interest in art.

MIKE McCONNELL | I was born in Mansfield, Ohio, to quintessential WASPy post-war Ozzie and Harriet– type parents. They didn't push me toward art but supported my development and tolerated my years as a hippy. My grandparents probably are the big reason I'm an artist. My grandmother was an avid gardener. She was always making flower arrangements and bringing home awards from the local garden club. The basement of their house was filled with dried flowers and arranging materials. One of her dear friends painted birds on pieces of barn wood that decorate many houses in Ohio to this day. My grandfather took me to lots of places, but my favorite was the wooded lot behind their house that always had blue jays calling out and flying between the trees.

LKH | What were your early formal art education experiences?

MM | I started college at the University of Denver. The biggest reason was not for an education, more that it was the number-one school for hippies then. . . . I remember my first art class where a model dropped her clothes. Studying art was something I immediately wanted to do more of. I wasn't doing very good academically, and I was missing my friends and family in Maryland. I transferred to MICA the next year. I fell in love with painting and printmaking. The teachers I remember the most are Raoul Middleman, Abby Sangiamo, John Sparks, and Anne Tabachnik. I didn't do any abstract work at MICA. Strictly landscape and figurative work. As I look back on Anne Tabachnik's art, I realize that she probably planted the seed that grew into my combining abstract with figurative imagery in what I make today.

LKH | How and why did you become an illustrator?

MM | I consider myself fortunate that Jim Butcher, my brother's best friend, was a MICA graduate with an established illustration practice in Baltimore. He took me under his wing, and I started to make money from day one. I was totally committed to being a successful illustrator but always kept in mind that I'd rather be a painter someday. I had a great run as an illustrator, but after a couple of decades, the business declined and my enthusiasm waned. The biggest catalyst for my switch was a continuing studies course I took at MICA taught by Michael David Brown. At the time, he was a very successful illustrator transitioning to fine art. He showed me the crayon-and-ink technique I currently use. He got me to draw in public places and fill journals and sketchbooks.

LKH | Describe the technical processes you have developed in your work over the past five years. Who are some of the modern artists who have had the greatest impact on your artist psyche?

MM I had no idea what my work would look like when I committed to fine art five years ago. I hadn't painted for over thirty years. I had a phobia about starting again until I took a workshop in California. That's where I learned to paint with liquid acrylics on wood panels. I like hard surfaces that I can sand and scrape into. The acrylics dry fast, so I can paint over something I don't think is working—mistakes aren't a bad thing. They become foundations. The main influences for my art are nature and personal experiences. My work is hugely driven by . . . artists David Hockney, Henri Matisse, and Paul Klee.

LKH What else would you like for your public, an audience, or the casual viewer to know about your artistic intents?

MM I paint intuitively. Color, line, texture, and pattern are not things that I think about individually, but there's lots of thought on how they interact and balance with each other. Narratives help viewers interact with my work, but they're just another tool for me, like color, line, texture, and pattern. What I really do as an artist is paint space—the very real space of memories and dreams and fantasies. Space you can weave your way through and come out someplace unexpected. Space [that], after you find something that resonates, encourages you to look further. Space that decants. Space you can come back to.

The interview with
Mike McConnell
was conducted from
July to October 2017.