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Critics Pick
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CRITIC'S PICK

KIM McCARTY



Kim McCarty displays her watercolor portraits on the walls of her Malibu studio.

Painter Kim McCarty's studio windows overlook the Malibu shoreline, but she usually keeps the blinds drawn. Her focus is interior, and it is manifested in half-length watercolor portraits of nude adolescents with lost expressions. "Old or young, people can have the same sort of face with a searching gaze," she says.

Such yearning faces, loosely limned in pastels or grays on sheets of Arche paper, peer down from the walls of her studio. McCarty uses a wet-on-wet watercolor technique to create thousands of images, some as large as 50 by 60 inches, before choosing the few that she feels are most effective. "I've always been interested in forms of portraiture," she says. "But as I continued painting and drawing, I found that I was not that interested in the specifics."

It is not coincidental, she says, that she began this recent body of work as her son, 16-year-old Chas, and daughter, 19-year-old Clancy, entered late adolescence. "It's so fleeting how youth disappears," she says. "This is documenting them before they go."

McCarty's pieces have appeared in numerous group exhibitions, including "International Paper: Drawings by Emerging Artists" at UCLA's Hammer Museum in 2003, and in solo shows at such galleries as Cherry and Martin (formerly cherydelosreyes) in Los Angeles and Briggs Robinson in New York. Cherry and Martin, where her watercolors sell for \$4,000 to \$10,000, will have another show of her work in April.

McCarty, 49, wears her dark hair long and her lipstick red, and even in a tailored shirt and jeans exudes a European elegance. Raised in Geneva, Switzerland, she moved with her parents to Los Angeles at the age of 16. She entered the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena to study illustration but later switched her focus to painting. She completed her M.F.A. at UCLA in 1989, a time when the school's faculty was more supportive of installation, video, and conceptual art. "It was an interesting struggle even to pursue painting," she recalls.

Her watercolors, however, were born of a greater challenge. In 1994, while her husband, Michael McCarty, owner of Michael's restaurants in Santa Monica and New York, was out of town on business, their house was caught in one of the devastating Malibu fires. The blaze destroyed her studio, along with most of her paintings. "After that, I didn't have space to work in oil," she says, "so I started experimenting in watercolor." As if generating new life-forms, she painted patterns of cellular structures, which evolved to include the faces and forms of young people.

"In oil I felt like I was stopping time," says McCarty. "I wasn't able to capture the process of growing and aging. The veil of watercolor can do that."

—Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a Los Angeles correspondent for ARTnews.