

THE SCENE'S THE THING

By Kurt Shaw

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Just a short drive north of Pittsburgh, past Zelienople on Interstate 79, one can almost feel the magnificent beauty that lay before oneself when looking out the window.

If you've taken the drive and haven't noticed, then you simply are living inside your own head, because the landscape out there, with its rolling farmland and forests, especially in the fall, is some of the most commanding in our region.

In fact, drive along any of the hundreds of country roads in Venango and Mercer counties, and you will be absolutely amazed, for the beauty never seems to stop.

"I've traveled a lot, but nothing really works for me like Western Pennsylvania," landscape painter Thomas G. McNickle says.

Now retired at the age of 62, after 31 years as an arts educator in the Neshannock School District, McNickle paints every day the landscape that surrounds him. He was born and raised in the region, and has lived in the countryside just outside of Volant ever since.

In the 30-plus years he has been painting, he has gained a national reputation for his work, both in watercolor and oil, which almost always features the Western Pennsylvania landscape that he loves so much.



Now residents of the region have a chance to see the magnificence that McNickle has been exporting in the form of his landscape paintings for years now to galleries as far away as Charleston, S.C., and as conversely cosmopolitan as Manhattan.

Last weekend, he opened his latest solo exhibition at the Hoyt Institute of Fine Arts in New Castle, not far from where he painted all of the 51 oil paintings on display.

Most visitors to the Hoyt are familiar with McNickle's watercolor paintings. A member of the Pennsylvania, American and National Watercolor Societies, McNickle has exhibited off and on in various group exhibitions at the art center over the years. So the vibrant, texture-laden oils, which range from small studies to large-scale works, will likely come as a surprise.

Even so, he hasn't let go of a lot of the telltale signs that are his signature, such as the panoramic vistas that he favors, a favorite format for his watercolors. Here, in works such as "Morning Puddle" and "Ironweed in Twilight," the format is just as effective.

"It's almost a 2-to-1 ratio," he says, pointing to the paintings, displayed here one atop the other. "It really suits the landscape, because it makes you feel like you're seeing more than what you are really seeing."



Feeling like you are seeing more than what you are really seeing is what McNickle's work is all about. His work is more about perception than place.

Although he does take some photographs before beginning a painting, as well as making several

small watercolor studies, McNickle says, "Most of it, for me, is relying on memory. Not the original memory, but kind of an organic memory where, once you begin to paint, it starts to come back to you. It begins to unfold in your head, and you can trace it back like a piece of string."

McNickle says he doesn't rely on just the memory of a place, but the "experience" of a place, from the smells to the bird songs. The result is a totally evocative picture, one that pulls the viewer in visually while simultaneously reaching out in reference to the other senses.

Such is the case with "Saplings in the Snow," a large painting of sunlight shimmering on a snow-covered forest floor in a Pennsylvania Game Reserve. McNickle says the painting is about "the whole feeling of deep snow, the softness of it when you're walking through it, that hush quality."

But it's also about the moment when he first came upon the scene.

"I was walking down an abandoned railroad bed, which is elevated in the center and gives you that perspective that you see in the painting, and as I was walking along I turned and looked. The light was coming from behind me, and it was just starting to hit the tops of those trees, streaking through on the snow. I thought, 'That's it, that's what I want.'"

Most of his paintings are like that, capturing not just a place but the moment in time that he experienced it. That's why he almost always has a pad of watercolor paper and watercolors with him, often stopping his car while driving to quickly execute a small study or two.

For example, several small studies led to the creation of "Creekside Sunrise," a large, masterful painting of a blazing sunrise that looms over a cow pasture. Although he has driven by the same pasture many times, that early-morning sunrise one morning caught his attention, causing him to make several studies of it. He knew he would use them later in an effort to bring back the memory of the moment.

"It's like when you walk down a street and you hear a noise in an alley, you turn quickly and then you turn back, and it's gone, never to be that way again. But because it caught your attention that way, it's kind of freeze-framed in your memory.



That's kind of what the studies are for me. They take me back to the initial experience."

"Jonathan's Fire" is another painting directly related to experience. "I was coming home one night in my car, and as I went down over the hill I could see this huge glow. At first, I thought it was a barn fire, but when I got there I saw that my neighbor had lit a huge pile of debris that he had been collecting for some time.

"I watched it for about a half-hour, taking notes and pictures. Then I went home and made different studies of it. But I could still smell the smoke in my clothes, and remember the crackling of the fire. It's the energy of the fire that I wanted to paint, so I painted two versions of it."

In the version displayed here, the vibrant pyre that serves as the focal point draws the viewer in, but more important are the violet hues that surround it, in both the smoke and the grass in the foreground, which effectively expresses the violence and intensity of the roaring blaze.

This exhibition constitutes the first time that McNickle has shown his oils altogether exclusively. And it shows, above all, his remarkable range.

"One of the things that I never wanted to be was a one-trick painter," McNickle says. "You know, like the guy who paints sunsets, or whatever. Because what I want to do is go out, and when a scene hits me I want to confront it totally on its own terms and let that take precedence over what I do and how I do it, so that the scene becomes the thing."

Thomas McNickle is represented by

JERALD MELBERG
GALLERY

Jerald Melberg Gallery
625 South Sharon Amity Road
Charlotte, NC 28211
704.365.3000
gallery@jeraldmelberg.com
www.jeraldmelberg.com