

A Day in the Life of an Artist

Mary Beth McKenzie

by Wende Caporale

The powerful paintings and monotypes of Mary Beth McKenzie are represented in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington among many other institutions. Her work is represented by ACA Gallery in New York City. Mary Beth's education included training at The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, The Cooper School of Art, Cleveland, Ohio and later in New York City. Having designed her destiny to study in New York, she attended the Art Student's League and the National Academy of Design where she studied with Robert Brackman, Daniel Greene and Robert Philipp. Mary Beth is also a sought-after teacher with wait-listed students anxious to benefit from her experience.

As I entered her studio in New York City recently, I was awed by the body of work that crammed her large loft home and studio. The life-sized subjects were mostly urbanites of both genders and various ethnicities. The selection process in locating models for her compositions, she explained, involves the daily interactions with familiar people. She will hire professional models, some of whom have alternate careers in the arts, but will also engage students, family and friends. She directs my attention to two current works-in-progress of a young woman who she explains is one of her students and her current "muse". Mary Beth works mostly from life while sometimes incorporating composite backgrounds from plein air studies and her imagination that she refers to as "pieces of things she likes". Although many of her paintings are of particular subjects, her end result is far more

than simply a portrait; they represent a psychological moment with the people with whom she interacts on a regular basis.

Mary Beth offers a cup of cappuccino she makes explaining that the pot was a gift from her husband, Tony Mysak. They met in an art class many years ago and he eventually pursued a career as a highly successful photographer. I am anxious to begin to discuss her work and her life as an artist. It was over thirty years ago when

I first discovered Mary Beth's stunning work in a Connecticut gallery but being able to witness an even more seasoned artist's work in her studio was memorable. As she digs through canvas after canvas, she brings out several self-portraits which she has done at various points throughout her career. She jokes that she is the one subject who is always available. The progression illustrates the evolution of her style as I see the artist slip from



Amina (Red Dress), oil on canvas, 60 x 50" (154 x 127cm)

“Coming at drawing three different ways... drawing the contour, pushing out with volume and carving in with negative shape, always questioning whatever you put down.”

her youthful ideals to the seasoned, yet still-searching professional she has become. For me what was noteworthy was to see the development through this singular subject; how her early portraits are more academic while her later work includes bold strokes with the palette knife and rich notes of raw colour. Unlike Rembrandt's self-portraits which illustrate his varying economic circumstances, Mary Beth's are mostly devoid of tell-tale signs of materialism; aside from a green trench coat and occasional hat, very little about her clothing gives the viewer any signs of her circumstances. What is most in evidence in the portraits is

the intensity of her gaze which she turns inward and her increasing wisdom.

Her association with Robert Philipp was a major influence not only on her work but also in the development of her attitudes as an artist. Mary Beth's education began in Cleveland with Jose Cintron and later at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but it was at the Art Student's League and the National Academy of Design in New York when she studied with Robert Philipp, Daniel Greene, Robert Brackman and later Burton Silverman where she hit her stride. Philipp had a particular impact on Mary Beth; she studied with him at the National Academy

and later posed for him at his studio in Carnegie Hall. She recalls his remarkable enthusiasm for life as well as for painting and saw this evidenced in his bold, assured handling of paint. He shared with her his memories of associations with John Singer Sargent, Frank Vincent DuMond and the German artists Wilhelm Leibl and Adolf von Menzel. Mary Beth recognized the valuable lesson she was experiencing and concluded that being an artist was a total commitment and a way of life. She recalls Philipp saying that "the first 50 years are the hardest" and as she continues to evolve, she can comprehend his meaning.



Benat, oil on canvas, 64 x 48" (163 x 122cm)



Lemington, oil on canvas, 50 x 28" (127 x 72cm)



Couple (Benat and Christina), oil on canvas, 48 x 60" (122 x 154cm)

A master teacher, Mary Beth has enjoyed this role and has been doing so for over three decades at the Art Student's League and the National Academy of Design in New York City where she was once a student. In addition, there are the annual workshops she gives at the Silvermine Art Guild in New Canaan, Connecticut and occasional invitational workshops elsewhere. With this in mind, I ask Mary Beth how she manages her time and she shares that she prefers to group teaching assignments together to enable her to have days free to pursue her work.

Having enjoyed the status of being a student in her class,

I recognize how she takes every student seriously. She explains how she gains fulfillment by helping students on their journey. We discuss our shared involvement in teaching and she explains her concept of developing a drawing with an emphasis on abstract shapes. She refers to this idea as "Coming at drawing three different ways; through line, volume and negative shape by drawing the volume and carving in with negative shape, always questioning whatever you put down". Mary Beth shares with her students how difficult the challenge is to make art and indicates her occasional frustration with students who are

far too interested in the results. She says something curious: "painting keeps you honest" further explaining that you can only teach the methods that you actually incorporate. Mary Beth says that "painting is a slow, unconscious development in which you try to do better each time". She recalls one of her teachers suggesting it would take "miles and miles of canvas" to learn how to paint, a comment that I have often heard from my husband and one of Mary Beth's former teachers, Daniel Greene.

When she is not teaching, Mary Beth spends her time in the studio. She is the mother of two grown daughters, Zsuzsa and



Ivy (plaid shirt), oil on canvas, 25 x 24" (64 x 60cm)



Self Portrait (Diebenkorn print), oil on canvas, 17 x 14" (43 x 36cm)

Marcisi, who were adopted from Hungary at 7½ and 5 ½. She has painted numerous portraits of them and comments how Marcisi was always willing to pose and lately Zsuzsa has become more interested in being a subject. There is a narrative quality to Mary Beth's work that is choreographed by the artist and she admits that "you paint your life". In the studio is a wonderful large portrait of the two girls with their dog shortly after they

arrived from Hungary.

When involved in a project, Mary Beth can work long hours, sometimes eleven or twelve at a stretch. She often has several projects she works on simultaneously since her time is somewhat governed by the model's availability. Her attitude is that it is great to move from one painting to another at different stages since it "brings an energy back to something you're working on". In contrast, she remarks on students who diligently work day after day on the same painting and feels she personally would lose objectivity seeing it every day. At the same time, she does not allow too much time to intervene before returning to the painting since she fears she could lose her place and her courage. Mary Beth shows me numerous examples of her figurative works including a pregnant nude that SHE characterizes as a life that is "ripe with possibility."

In elaborating about her process, she claims that she is willing to "go in and let the painting lead" explaining that the original concept for her should be flexible. She feels that sometimes she recognizes opportunities as she is working and "it takes her to a better place". Mary Beth characterizes the process as "doing battle" when formulating a painting. It surprises her to hear that her students feel her work just flows and that there is little effort involved. Occasionally that might be true, but that is not the norm, according to Mary Beth.

Just as I thought I might be monopolizing too much of Mary Beth's time, she asks me if I would like to see her monotypes. One folder is filled with circus imagery one of which was recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. From the window, she points to an area across the street that is now entirely boarded up and explains that until recently

those buildings housed horse stables. She heard recently that they would be closing and immediately visited to record the atmosphere with sketches that she later formulated into a series of fifteen monotypes.

Mary Beth opened a folder and displayed the delicate images on rice paper that documented a part of the city that no longer exists. As she enthusiastically shares the work, I envision Mary Beth's intuitive method that mobilizes all the senses as she works. Oddly enough, another folder consists of previous encounters she has had on New York City streets; China town, outdoor vendors and the famous Fulton Street Fish Market. As she shows me the final image, she says she can still imagine the smell that she experienced. These urban, decidedly New York encounters capture a fleeting time that would be lost without the visual impact of Mary Beth's work. □

Website: marybethmckenzie.com

Wende Caporale is a highly successful artist whose portraits are always in great demand. Her biography and list of awards and accomplishments runs to many pages. As you'll read in this ongoing series, Wende's pro-active approach to work and life make her the ideal columnist for the subject every artist has to face on a daily basis.
Email: wendecaporale@aol.com
www.wendecaporale.com