

April 5, 2016

Unstill Life

by Tom Kerr



Painter Rebecca King, mother of five, takes a radically traditional approach to her work. Photo by Matt Rose.

"I remember being a small girl at the National Gallery in D.C., and staring in awe at the way Monet skipped colored blotches across the canvas to make the magic of the painting," says painter Rebecca King, who works from a private studio in Black Mountain.

"I thought to my young self, 'I can do that. I want to do that!'"

Seeing original work in person still gives her a thrill like no other. "The variety and unexpected turn of the brushstroke in any work of art has always made me excited. But

especially how the artist uses those strokes to create form, distance, dimension, and emotional connection with the viewer," she explains.

The raw materials have always inspired her, too, and whenever possible, she makes her own paints by grinding raw pigments and mixing them with linseed oil. King appreciates the subtle vibrancy, brilliancy, and "freshness" of handmade paints — and their remarkable longevity. "The painted results of the methods of the Old Masters have lasted for 500 years," she points out, whereas many commercial products like premixed paint and gesso have only been around for a century or less.

"It seems a great risk," she says, "to invest your life's work in something that's not been cured by time."



Town Square

King's commitment as an artist is, indeed, a lifelong one that she sees as a continual work in progress. A figurative and landscape painter, she studied Old Master drawing and painting methods at the Fine Arts League of Asheville, where she apprenticed with world-renowned fresco master Benjamin Long, IV. Students of that rarified European tradition work "from life," meaning that they exclusively use live models or natural settings — versus imagined scenery or photographs.

"Painting from life is important," King believes. "It is a more direct way to gather what you need for your painting. Technology offers us all shortcuts: you can watch a kitten on YouTube or you can hold a kitten in your own hands. In my mind, the existential experience of holding the cat, and the existential experience of painting from life, is far greater."

Meanwhile, propensities towards one type of expression or another matter less, King thinks, than the desire of the artist and a "stubborn bravado." King says that she was taught that to really make great art, "I was going to struggle ... the goal will always be elusive, and you can't force the magic. But you can apply yourself with integrity to the craft, and you can learn and study up on your goal."

She admits that the life of the artist can be downright difficult. "It costs you your pride, criticism, relationships, much time and money. All this you throw over in the search for artistic integrity and the lonely road of developing that innate talent you were born with. The artist has to draw out the most water from the well of their ability. When I paint or draw, I'm attempting to be honest, to come as honestly to the work as I can, to show up ready to meet the experience with a stoutness of spirit, and to say what needs to be said."

Showing up to paint may not be as easy or convenient as it used to be for King, thanks to what she refers to as "the generally humbling experience" of becoming a parent. King has a 7, 5, and 3-year-old, and identical twin girls — and homeschools her two oldest children.



Tuscan Sunset

But she acknowledges, "There is nothing quick about creating a life's work, nothing neat, particularly ordered, or very controlled. Monetary success is fleeting, and critical acclaim is capricious and fickle, so these are poor indicators of success for the artist. The biggest challenge is to keep showing up at the easel with the same enthusiasm, and gratitude, and passion that you had before, tempered with a growing humble maturity."

Taking her easel into nature to paint landscapes also offers its own unique challenges — and the occasional adrenaline rush. Once King was painting in France when a wild boar went charging past her, a bit too close for comfort. "Here in the mountains of Western North Carolina," she says, "it's usually a bear running by late in the day."

Rebecca King's work is on display at the Grand Bohemian Gallery in Asheville, the Crossnore Fine Art Gallery in Crossnore, NC, and via her website, rebeccakingfineart.com.