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Capturing the Elusive

Lafayette artist's work combines minimalism and realism

By Jen Copeland



Pam McCauley Photos Julie Cheshire

Years of painting still life arrangements and attending life drawing sessions has made longtime Lafayette resident Pam McCauley a skillful draftsman, able to work quickly, dashing in confident lines and swashes of color, to capture moods and fleeting moments.

"I like to paint loosely, to catch an emotion that is being given off by the human or object," said McCauley.

In her prints of three gleaming white yachts dry docked at the Oxford Bay boat yard in Oregon, the prows of the yachts are marked out with two, well-placed cedar brown lines, squares of navy blue suggest the cabin windows, light grey washes puts one side of the yachts into shade while the other side of the boats is left white as untouched watercolor paper. The effect is marvelously simple. Minimalism and realism are combined with deftness, the resultant image being one a fisherman might see on his way down to the end of the pier, bucket of worms, tackle box and fishing rod in hand, catching a glimpse of the blindingly bright sunlight bouncing off the sides of the yachts into his eyes as he passes by them.

Her technique is fast, painting her immediate impressions, not laboring over the work and getting bogged down in details. McCauley makes effective use of the transparency of the watercolor medium and surface textures to capture the most elusive elements of reality.

Enjoying the life of an artist to its fullest, McCauley often goes on plein air painting journeys with other painters, usually being the only watercolorist in the group. One of her recent trips was to the Point Montara Lighthouse in Montara, Calif., where she found differently colored and numbered floats tied to thick ropes scattered about the grounds and

artfully arranged them into a tangled, still life heap. For a touch of added drama, the park ranger threw a fit when he saw what she had done (not to worry; for the sake of their art, artists endure these over reactions from the public all the time). Her painting of the floats is mind-engaging, an orderly composition of disorder.

McCauley appreciates the beauty in life. This is apparent from her artwork. She believes everything is alive and has a particular influence, even inanimate objects.

"Surround yourself with objects that mean something to you. I think you have to be careful what you have around you," she said.

McCauley spends time relaxing in her home garden, away from it all, pattering amongst her flowers, which brings to mind her first painting experiment. When she was a little girl, she decided that the petals of a certain flower would look better painted a different color. She fetched her paint set and redecorated the petals, like a character in "Alice in Wonderland" working in the Queen of Hearts' garden.

The watercolor painting titled "Still Life and Landscape in One" takes this same playful leap into an imaginary world filled with red apples as big as houses. A green striped dishcloth takes on the shape of sand dunes by the sea and cliffs by Point Montara Lighthouse on the coast of Oregon.

McCauley is grateful to Casey Rasmussen White and Cathy Riggs for encouraging her as a professional artist in so many ways. Her watercolor paintings were recently displayed at Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre and as part of the Lamorinda Arts Alliance Show at the Orinda Library, and her work is currently featured at the Martinez Art Association Show at John Muir Aspen Center and the Lindsay Dirx Brown Gallery Show put on by the California Watercolor Association. For more information, visit www.pammccauleywatercolors.com.



Heceta Lighthouse, watercolor.

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