

VIEW from the Hill



Snooks Pond Estate, 2002, oil on wood panel,
13 x 11 1/2 inches, by Sarah McCoubrey

A Sense of Place

to recreate, but the unvarnished world as it is. Working in oils, she layers colors on wood and sands off parts until she is satisfied with the interaction of colors. Often, she says, the subjects of her paintings are transformed or vanish by the time she completes the piece. "It's not the natural world I paint," she says. "It's the world."

Years ago, McCoubrey was warned by her father, a noted art historian, to steer clear of becoming an artist. But, with the

encouragement of two landscape painters she studied with at the University of Pennsylvania, she discovered a passion for creating images that impart a sense of place, and kept at it. Since then, she has exhibited her work at galleries in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., as well as throughout Central New York. For a 2005 exhibition, she strayed from the palette and produced a series of digital photographs and letters portraying a fictional 19th-century landscape painter, Hannah Morse, whom McCoubrey envisioned as a friend and kindred spirit of real-life women's rights activist Matilda Joselyn Gage of Fayetteville, New York. McCoubrey has also spent time during two of the past three summers in County Mayo, Ireland, through fellowships with the Ballinglen Arts Foundation. "Ireland," she says, "is almost too beautiful to paint."

Like anyone who has journeyed through the seasons of Central New York, landscape artist Sarah McCoubrey has seen more than her share of overcast skies. In fact, when she arrived in Syracuse 15 years ago from Philadelphia to teach at the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA), she was astounded by the gray, often dreary surroundings in the months between the fade of the autumnal blaze and the burst of spring greening. "Gradually I could see the differences in the gray," she says. "We used to joke by calling my landscape painting class, 'Getting to Know Gray.'"

In searching for subject matter, McCoubrey considers herself a "backyard painter," closely observing the everyday environment and focusing on images that catch her attention. "I like to create this whole world of light and color," she says, "and then integrate the details." Details in McCoubrey's paintings often represent landscapes in transition intersected by human presence, or the quirkiness of contemporary life: a marsh with an abandoned oven, a wooded area decorated with real estate signs, neighborhood swimming pools, a miniature golf course, a massive mulch pile amid a cityscape lorded over by a sausage maker's dancing-pig billboard. It is not polished beauty she seeks

McCoubrey, who also teaches drawing and color in VPA's foundation program, enjoys taking landscape-painting students on field trips to such places as Peter Scott Swamp in Oswego County and the Labrador Unique Area in nearby Tully. "I tell them not to look at anything that's too beautiful already," she says. "I tell them to pretend they don't know what they're looking at and just paint the color."

—Jay Cox