

The Madness of Meaning in Art Ruminations On The Artwork Of Mark Stewart



by Sue Stewart

I am an English teacher who's married to an artist. So, despite my best efforts to contain myself, I'm always trying to discover the deeper meaning in my husband's work. He does not enjoy conversations about this. That's part of why he paints. Painting is his talking.

So he paints and I have imaginary conversations with him about his work and his life as an artist. In these imaginary conversations, he says what he really thinks but would never say in real life because he is too nice.

"I'm not sure people think very much about the deeper meaning in paintings," he would say. "If they're serious about a painting, it's probably because it's the right size and it works with their plaid couch."

I am nonplussed. "Well, then, what are all these art museums for?"

"Somebody needs to employ the art history majors."

"Take that Basquait exhibit we saw at the MFA last month – all his scrawled treatises, formulas, crowns, bones, male members. That's pretty rich stuff. There's got to be something to it."

"Durned if I know. He's dead, so we can't ask him."

"Well... you'll be dead one day. We won't be able to ask you then, either."

"Yep."

"In that case, I'm going to ask you some 'what for' questions now. Like, what was the inspiration for *Winter Roses*?"

"I needed one more painting for the February American Classic Art Auction and I happened to notice those straggly roses blooming over by the fence."

"I see a ton of Christian symbolism in that painting."

He fixes me with a derisively lidded look. "Oh?"

"Yes – the red rose, blooming in obscurity in the dead of winter, throbbing with beauty and life and truth, set against deepening shadows, the thorns just waiting to weave themselves into a crown... was any of that in your thinking as you were painting it?"

"Not really."

Since this is an imaginary conversation, I don't feel rebuffed.

"Or, that painting of Uncle Willie with the thick Czech accent – the one you named *Immigrant Son*. I love the way you composed it, with the path leading up, in front of him – a path taking him to his work and life purpose in what was once, to him, a new land. Except he's kind of old now and he's been up and down that path probably a thousand times. Past and present seem to merge in this painting."

"Girl, you've gotten good at Artspeak. The thing I like best about that painting is the hat. It cooperated with me."

"But didn't you feel a connection or something with Uncle Willie? A connection with the thousands of simple men like him who labor in obscurity?"

"Oh, I guess. Talking about it messes

with all that, somehow."

"That's just your imagination," I say, with an edge. He reminds me this is an imaginary conversation. Pretending to ignore his cheekiness, I continue.

"Ok. *Room After Room*. That painting won an Award of Merit at the National Arts for the Parks competition last year. I have no doubt the judge saw what I see in it – another beautifully subtle painting about time. The series of doors, opening upon successive dimensions – you could be going back, back to the time when these doors were made four hundred years ago of native oak for the Mission Concepcion in San Antonio. Or you could be going forward, approaching and entering the defining portals of your future. But it's the chair by the door, empty and waiting, that holds you to the here and now, inviting you to just... sit and be."

"I'm glad you're having so much fun with this," he says. He is amused and smiling, indulging me in love. I take this moment of good will to mention a painting we've argued about in real life.

"*On the Surface*."

"Nope. We're not going to talk about that one."

"Yes we are because this is MY imaginary conversation. You can go have your own conversation and make it turn out any way you want!" I say this while I am fondling his tickle spot, so his eyes are laughing and once again, he knows I am right.

I explain: "The deeper meaning of this painting is in the very nature of our argument about it! You painted it to be hung horizontally, but I noticed how many people cocked their head to the side when they looked at it to connect with the figure. 'It should be hung vertically,' I told you."

[We did notice that the men tended to like it horizontal (MALE CODE: practically naked females should always be horizontal) and women tended to connect better with it vertically. To be fair to the men, the technical prowess of the painting is more apparent when the painting is



Immigrant Son



Room After Room



Winter Roses



On The Surface



horizontal – the masterful rendering of water washing over sun-warmed skin tones isn't overwhelmed by the presence of the figure when the painting is hung in the horizontal orientation.]

I look in my husband's eyes. "Even though this is a painting of our daughter, the best thing about it, to me, is the back of it. Because you took 30 minutes to add hanging wire that would hang the painting vertically to acknowledge and honor my perspective, even if you didn't agree with me."

"So, do I get the prize as a husband, or an artist?"

"You are the best husband AND the best artist. Please kiss me now."

Last April, we were sitting on the porch in the late afternoon with a glass of wine, having a non-imaginary conversation. He mentioned what it was like to paint *Pecan Harvest*, a small recent painting I had considered (to myself) one of The Orphans – a little cast-off group of "wallflower" paintings not in a gallery yet.

"That's the way I always want to paint," he said. "It

was fast and powerful and fun."

"You were in the zone," I said, using our word for nirvana.

"I guess."

Later, when I was alone, I spent some time with *Pecan Harvest*. I saw what he was talking about, something I had totally missed because of my preconceptions about size and light and color. I saw the spontaneous impressionist movement, the life, the powerful excellence – I could FEEL him zoning as he painted it.

There he is now, in my imagination, sitting at his painting table wielding a fine-point watercolor brush loaded with blacky-green paint, commanding that pecan basket to arrive, appear, show up, materialize. And it obeys.

He looks up at me, happy.

"This is what it means, too," he says. "The how as much as the what." Δ

See Mark Stewart's ad on the front inside cover



Pecan Harvest