

The Artist's Road - Artist Interview Questions/Answers October 2015

Can you tell us about the origins of art in your life? Were there other artists in your family growing up? If so, did they play a role in your decision to become an artist?

First, thank you for having me participate in The Artist's Road. I am honored.

I have been drawing and painting since I can remember. My father was musical, played in a band for a time before family responsibilities took hold. My sister has a talent for writing and crafts, and makes spectacular beaded creations. My mother sewed all of our clothes, in addition to all of the clothes of our Barbie dolls! I recently reconnected with an old friend from middle school, and when we shared what we were doing in our lives, she told me "Well, you are doing exactly what you said you would do." I had forgotten that if you had asked me at five what I was going to be when I grew up, I'd have said "An artist, of course."

When I went to college (part time while holding down two jobs) I was told I would never make any money as an artist, so I studied business and accounting, which I enjoyed almost as much as art. There was a balance, a symmetry to numbers that I saw in both music and painting. I ended up in business management, but after 12 years, panicked. I was turning 30, and not living where I wanted to live or doing what I wanted to do. Every morning of those 12 years I looked at myself in the mirror and told myself I really just wanted to paint. So in 1986 I left that life behind, packed what I could into my van, and moved to Florida.

I took a job working part time in a small custom framing shop, and started painting again. I had taken a 12 year break from my art, and felt I had a lot of catching up to do. For the next five years I painted watercolors, and sold them at the frame shop. I also did calligraphy, taught cake decorating lessons at adult ed, became involved in the downtown business community and Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

I took a workshop from John Seerey Lester in 1988, and became friends with him and his wife. He generously mentored me, and invited me to paint with him whenever he had workshops locally. I am honored and indebted to him because he had faith in me. After 7 years, in 1992, after having sold 500 watercolors, I quit my day job. I first showed my work publicly in competitions like Birds in Art and at the National Audubon Convention, then at the Florida Wildlife Expo, which led to doing juried outdoor festivals. I developed a limited edition print line, and became involved in the emerging plein air events. I chaired an annual art auction fund raising event for Big Brothers and Big Sisters, all the while developing my artistic identity. My career has evolved to be multi-faceted, including my publishing company which produces my imagery in various forms, licensing to a limited number of publishers, representation with select fine art galleries on the east coast, working personally with collectors, some teaching, and working in advisory capacity to several plein air events and public fund raising events.

As an artist, it is important to have several streams of income, so that when one slows, another picks up.

Are you self taught or did you receive a formal art education in college, etc. Have you studied with other artists?

After studying with Seerey-Lester, I took workshops with Tim Theis, Don Demers and Skip Whitcomb, all artists whose work I admire. A workshop is a good jumpstart to any artist's studio efforts, no matter how long you have been painting. While I was studying with Seerey-Lester, he took a workshop with another artist, and stated how important it is to continue learning, stretching and honing your abilities as a painter. I believe workshops are essential for an artist's growth, and as artists we are continually learning. I recently studied with Larry Moore, whose skills are undeniable (he's put in the hours as an illustrator) who sees the world differently, and who is not afraid to experiment. To paint with him, to listen to his philosophy on painting, to stretch your skills as an artist - all make for a better painter. If at any time you feel that you know all there is to know about painting, you may as well put your brushes away. The artist who thinks he or she knows everything is an artist whose work has stalled. We can never know all there is to know about painting- it is a constant learning process. In fact, the more you do know, the more discoveries you make, the more you realize there is so much more to what we do. There are so many talented painters out there now giving good information. The workshop format is the best way to immerse yourself fully into painting, hang with like minded people, stretch your knowledge, fill your toolbox with new tools and get re-excited about your painting journey.

Do you consider the artist's life to be a kind of spiritual quest or journey, or simply a career, or . . . ?

Never simply a career! The artist's life to me, is a way of life, a lifestyle which includes that spiritual journey. I feel closest to God when I am out on location painting, so much so that I have been moved to tears by the beauty of my surroundings. To be able to share that beauty through my art is why I am here, and I am so grateful.

Being a creative person is following a passion that fills your days and nights. I dream of painting. Every day I don't get to paint is a day I can never get back. Knowledge of the *business* of art is necessary to make a living doing what you love, and I often recommend to students to take business classes if you want to make a living painting.

Do you consider yourself to be a naturalist as well as an artist?

Absolutely. As a landscape painter, especially plein air, you have to pay attention to everything out there - the incoming weather, the wind direction, where the sun is moving. My appreciation of wildlife, birds especially, has made me attentive to everything outside. My mother instilled in me a love of nature by pointing beauty out to me as a child- a beautiful sunset, the smell of a rose, a brilliant blue sky. She told her children every day to "Go outside and play." Nature was our playground and our teacher. We were lucky to live where we lived, and spent summers on the beach in Connecticut, hence my love of the coastline. In my paintings I try to express not only what these things look like, but more so what they feel like. I strive to paint the experience of being in that moment, at that place.

You seem to understand well the value of community. Working in solitude can be necessary for us as artists, but also isolating. Can you tell us a little bit about how you founded the Nanatuck Group and the rewards of working with a group of artists?

Nanatuck started as a small painting trip for friends and has grown to include friends of friends. What started as one week became three weeks, then 6 then 8. Friends have invited friends, and they have invited friends...I have met so many wonderful professional artists over the past five summers.

Can artists apply to stay and paint at Nanatuck or is it a closed group of friends?

Artists can't apply to Nanatuck, but I encourage painters to start their own Nanatuck. Pick a location, rent a house somewhere and get a group of painters to join you! Before I started my career, I took workshops, using the time to hone my skills, but at some point I realized that all I really need to do was paint. And paint a lot. The workshop format takes you away from your everyday responsibilities and lets you focus on painting. But what if you took that time alone, in an unfamiliar area, and just painted? My colleague and good friend, Katie Cundiff, and I met at a workshop in Guatemala. We learned that we lived less than a half hour from each other. We started painting locally together, then decided to travel together and just paint. We painted Montana, Vermont, the Outer Banks of NC, all over Florida, Spain, Argentina and just painted. That may well have been the foundation of Nanatuck. Katie and I spent the days searching painting locations, painting, then setting out our paintings, sharing what we did, critiquing each other, and helping each other grow. I have always wanted Nanatuck to be a place of sharing experiences, techniques and skills, of supporting each other and bringing what we can to the table. We are all in the same family, on our own journey to succeed in this art life. We are not competitors, but allies. The most generous artists I know are the most successful. They are giving their time, their resources, and their knowledge. At Nanatuck we go out and paint every day, then return in the evenings to dinner and wine on the table, and lots of art talk. We share painting locations, supplies, new finds, talk about galleries, marketing, the business of art, our successes and our failures. It's like adult art summer camp. My hope is that everyone leaves inspired and positive about their careers. As family, we can only help each other in this quest to share the beauty of the world we see. A rising tide lifts all boats - in this I agree. At Nanatuck, we celebrate each artists' achievements, and help each other achieve our goals throughout the year by recommending shows, attending each others events, keeping in touch with ideas and information.

The non-art world truly sees us as different - and we are. We can show beauty where it is missed, show passion about what is around us, and promote peace where it needs to be with love and tolerance. I am not very adept at social media, but my favorite is Instagram. I love that people I cannot communicate with in any other language are able to share their beauty with me through photographs, paintings, music and sculpture. Beauty is the universal language, and with the internet we are fortunate to get to share it with other artists around the world. The Pollyanna in me wishes it could only be used to share beauty, love and kindness.

Working alone in the studio can be daunting. When I am behind the easel, I often am on the headset phone with another artist. It's great to have several studio phone buddies!

What other artists' work do you look at regularly - historical and/or contemporary?

Andrew Wyeth for its mood and soul, Lowell Birge Harrison for its mystery, Thomas Alexander Harrison for its poetry and movement, Arthur Streeton for its edge work, Innes for its quietude, Walter Launt Palmer for its sensitivity, William Trost Richards for its portrayal of air, Bruce Crane for its sense of place - I am drawn to the tonalists, the naturalists.

We are inundated with art on the internet. For me, these contemporary painters rise above that mediocrity, use *design, execution and finish* beautifully in their work. They go the extra mile it takes to make paintings (and careers) that will stand the test of time: Clyde Aspevig, Robert Bateman, Ray Harris Ching, David J Curtis (UK), Don Demers, Tim Allen Lawson, Joseph McGurl, Skip Whitcomb, Michael Workman - Each of these artists has risen above the fray to stand out, not because of something sensational, but because of something ethereal. Their paintings have mystery, emotion and flawless execution. Not to offend anyone not listed, there are many others out there, but these are the first that come to mind.

What books do you turn to for inspiration?

There are too many. I have a library of over 600 books. Birge Harrison "Oil Painting" would be my first "go to" book. You can read Edger Payne, Mitchell Albala, Carlson and Ernest Watson over and over again for your whole career and learn something new each time. At each level of painting there are things to learn, and if you are at a beginning level you may not understand some of the concepts in a book. Read it a few years later and you will "get" some things you may have missed on the first, or 5th! reading.

You have traveled extensively to new landscapes and countries. Do you find travel to be an important part of keeping passion and challenge in your work? Or, do you find that exploring a familiar subject in depth provides the greater challenge?

Passion is always in my work. I live on a 39 acre bird sanctuary in North Carolina, see deer feeding every morning, watch the seasons change, and storms roll through - there is no greater inspiration for me than being out in nature. All I have to do is walk out the door to be inspired, wherever I am. If I lived in a large city, I would paint different subjects because I am very affected by my surroundings. I have spent time in Chicago and NYC and in my mind saw paintings that I would never have dreamed of out in the NC countryside or on a Florida beach. I see paintings everywhere I look.

Exploring a subject that you are familiar with enhances your ability to portray that subject. I love birds, have studied them since I was a child, have been fascinated by them, so when I paint them, I am painting the experience of knowing them. I can feel their feathers as I paint them. When I paint the beaches in Venice, Florida, I am painting 20 years of the experience of being there. That's a good thing, that I am painting

something that I am intimately connected with, but have to be careful of presenting it the same way every time. You have to caution against not really *seeing* your subject when you are so familiar with it. We make solutions while we are painting, and it is easy to fall into using the same solutions (same colors, same textures, same brush) instead of really seeing your subject that day. The risk is that you become routine or formulaic in your portrayal. It is a challenge for me to surpass any prior painting I have done of a subject, make it better, make it say something more, evoke more emotion.

On the other hand, when I travel to different areas, different environments, I really have to study and absorb the place to be able to re-present it. It requires from me a high level of attention. It may be a day or two of sketching before I actually start to paint. I like to get to know an area, to feel my surroundings so that I can convey what the experience felt like. When someone looks at a painting of mine and tells me they can feel the warmth of the sand, smell the scent of the breeze, then and only then have I done what I set out to do.

I was once told by Frank Jennings, deceased, a watercolorist, "If your painting does not transcend its source, it's not worth painting at all." It is a great compliment for someone to say to me "You make it look better than it is," because that tells me that I am painting how I see the subject, and showing its beauty. I once had someone stop in front of a painting at a show, exclaim excitedly "OMG, I pass that spot every day and never noticed how beautiful it was. I'll never look at it the same." I told her that then, I had done my job.

What approximate percentage of your painting time is spent in the studio and what percentage is spent painting outdoors?

I spend January, February and March in Florida, painting almost every morning on location, then afternoons in the studio. In the spring I head to NC and do mostly studio work for my galleries with some outdoor painting. For the last ten years I have participated in The Forgotten Coast Great Paint Out in May in Florida, usually spending two weeks there. In July and August I am at Nanatuck in Maine, painting on location. I spend the fall back in NC in the studio, getting ready for gallery shows and the southern season.

Have you worked in other mediums besides oil? If so, why have you chosen oil to be your primary medium?

I have a small oil painting on board that I did for my Aunt when I was 7. So I guess oils are my first love. I painted in watercolors for about five years when first moving to Florida. After the workshop in '88 I worked in acrylics for a short time, but found home when I returned to oils. Funny that my first paintings were a swan, a lighthouse, flowers. At 58 my favorite subjects are still birds, the coast and gardens!

Would you share what colors you typically keep in your palette?

The typical warm and cool of each primary, plus a few convenience colors. I am constantly experimenting. So I go from a limited palette of alizarin crimson, yellow ochre, ultramarine blue & white to a full palette of cadmium yellow pale, yellow ochre, cadmium red, alizarin crimson, transparent oxide red, cobalt blue and ultramarine blue.

Other colors I use are cadmium lemon, cadmium orange, burnt umber and viridian. The location I am painting determines what palette I use. Every area I paint has a different color and intensity of light, so I adjust my palette accordingly. For example, New England has a cooler, more muted palette than the warm southern skies in Florida, so I use burnt umber instead of transparent oxide red. The west coast of Florida has a different light than the east coast of Florida, the colors are more pure, intense. Paying attention to the greens in an area will clue you in on the color of the atmosphere.

We would love to learn more about High Ridge Gardens. Is it currently available as an artist's retreat? What are your plans for the future of the property?

High Ridge Gardens is a 39 acre property listed on the North Carolina Birding Trail, about an hour from Charlotte. It holds my home, a 1350 square foot studio and a large guest house. On the middle pasture is a barn with two horses and two goats. It is available for painting retreats, as well as birding, photography and musical retreats. I have had groups from Georgia, North Dakota, South Carolina and Florida here.

I have a property manager who is available when I am traveling. The guest house is a 4 bedroom, three bath, (with seven beds) modestly furnished brick house. A rustic place to come together with a huge country kitchen and dining area, front porch rockers overlooking a pond, cozy living-room/art library with fireplace. Birds, deer, rabbits, hawks, fox are often seen. It is a wildlife lovers paradise, an artists' inspiration. Within the next few years I plan to devote much of my time promoting HRG as an artist destination with residencies, private instruction, apprenticeships, workshops and retreats. HRG does not have the crashing waves of the shore or the rising majesty of the mountains, in fact, it is in between both. But if you can make a painting here, you can make a painting anywhere. HRG has a peaceful, beautiful serenity. Its a very spiritual place, to be sure. Not fancy, not expensive, but worth the trip.

For the future, I plan to leave HRG as an ongoing entity. In order to do that, I have to leave a foundation to support it. All of my estate will go to funding the foundation. I have started taking donations, both large and small, and plan to have a million dollars in it before I die. I have a lot of work to do! My first fundraiser is a limited edition book available now. All proceeds go to the foundation.

<http://www.maryericksonart.com/books-cards/Autumn-2015.html>

What do you feel makes your work or style unique?

I have been told that my work does not look like my peers, and to me that is a good thing. You can look at some paintings and tell the era in which they were painted because of similarities to their peers, then there are others that are timeless, and stand on their own. This summer in Maine, Helga Tesdorf (of Andrew Wyeth fame) told me my work has soul. She said she could *feel* my paintings, and that was the best thing someone can say to me. I am in love with what I paint. The beauty of our environment moves me, and excites me. I am passionate about what I paint and if it doesn't touch me in some way, I won't paint it. Why bother? Much of what I like to see in my painting is contrasts - like dark against light, warm against cool, broad strokes against fine lines, hard edges against soft edges, smooth against rough. I like a painting to have texture, mood and unity. I do go the extra mile on my paintings, what has been called "detail". But for me, that is the way I express what I see, but it is only the impression of detail. It

simply requires a smaller brush and more patience. It requires the ability to draw. It requires a contemplative mindset, a quiet space in the mind.

What do you think is the single most important lesson or tip you have learned about painting in your career?

I attended a lecture by David Leffell, where he was asked “What is the secret to painting?” His answer was, “Oh that’s easy, it’s the same as the secret to life. *Pay attention.*” That statement was profound, and has stuck with me. Another story he told was of how another artist helped his career get off the ground, and how important it was to support each other.

What words of encouragement or piece of advice would you give a beginning artist?

Be honest, paint what you love, work really really hard, take some business classes, and pay attention - pay attention to opportunities, pay attention to responsibilities (both personal and in business), pay attention to your work - always improving - and give back generously. Give advice, give paintings, give time, give money - that all comes back tenfold.