



A synthesis of styles: The art of Maude McDonald

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Wednesday, January 11, 2012 - In the Middle by Charles van Heck



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DEXTER, Michigan, January 11—The following is the first in a series of interviews with artists, photographers, and others that will cover a broad range of topics and introduce the reader to people they perhaps would not have met otherwise.

MAUDE MCDONALD, ARTIST

During times of economic uncertainty, the arts become an orphaned child. Yet, there are many in the arts who, through their work; provide us with insights into who we are both as individuals and as a society.

Maude McDonald is one such artist. Her work both inspires and challenges the viewers, particularly women, to consider their personal journey. McDonald's work is a feminist statement that both celebrates the feminine and addresses the abuse, neglect, and abandonment women must contend with in their relationships. To limit oneself to this single perspective of McDonald's is, however, to miss the richness of her techniques and the diversity of her interests as an artist.

Q: What brought you to art and how did you develop as an artist?

A: I was lucky to have a mother that recognized my talent and love of art at a very early age, and [that I was able to] receive the encouragement to pursue and [the] freedom to express. As a young child, I painted on walls, floors, under tables, any flat surface that

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IS OBAMA TO BLAME?



caught my fancy. At the age of eight, my mother gave me a wooden painter's box and a supply of canvas panels.

The muse was happy and my mother's house was saved. I still have that painter's box. I keep it on a shelf in my studio. It's a reminder to me. It allows me to leave behind the restraints and rules and look at the world with the childlike awareness in which I began this journey. It allows me to block out those that say it cannot be done, should not be done, and push on with the determination of what could be done.

I was self-taught until the age of twenty. While attending Texas A&M University, I realized the art muse would not be ignored. I submitted a portfolio to the Museum of Fine Arts Academy in Houston, was

accepted, and left the traditional route of academia behind. I accepted every mentor study program available in Europe. It was there [that] my love of art developed into something deeper, something sacred. Throughout the years, despite what responsibilities life pressed on me, my art was always my refuge, my therapist, and my voice.

Q: Your paintings reveal a diversity of interests and topics. It is as if you are taking those who view your art on an emotional life journey. Most artists limit the scope of subjects and interests. You give yourself wide latitude. To what do you attribute this diversity?

A: I refuse to fetter my muse. An idea is born and I pursue it on canvas. I cannot take a snapshot of life and make it fit snugly into one labeled box, nor can I make my art fit into one style of art. Instead of branding my work by subject or style, I suppose you could define my brand as an "emotional dissection of life."

Q: You studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Houston, then went on to study in France and Holland. How did each of those educational experiences influence your own form of art and its meaning?

A: If I had to give a knee-jerk response, it would be "rules." I can only speak of my own experience. In the states, when given an assignment in an art class, I would often bend the rules or instructions... not drastically, but enough to satisfy the curiosity in my mind of "what if". I would be penalized for that. In Europe, if I bent the rules, the instructor would comment "Interesting. Tell me why you decided to try this?" This gave me the freedom to experiment with different techniques and styles, sometimes within the same painting.

Q: There is a robust awareness of your environment throughout all of your paintings. You once said, "Artists are mercurial. Our greatest motivators are joy and pain. Emotion, perhaps more than the visual stimulation, inspires my work."

It seems that you are automatically analyzing both yourself and your environment to bring life to a canvas. How conscious are you of this process? And is the level of energy you apply to work exhausting or exhilarating as you create?

A: It is totally unconscious. It is who I am and defines how I paint. Depending upon the subject matter, the work can be totally exhilarating or extremely painful. My canvas is my therapist. I purge not only my feelings, but also the angst or joy I feel from others.

Q: You completed a painting titled "Just Bloomin" that blends styles, particularly abstraction and realism. You have done this in other paintings. This blending works well in your art. What originally inspired you to do this synthesis of techniques and styles?

A: I have an insatiable curiosity, a constant desire to answer the question "what if." Then my love of challenge pushes me through the process of the work.

Q: In Jacques Rivière's essay "Present Tendencies in Painting," he wrote that the cubists' painters were asking questions about what must be put in place of lighting and perspective. When you are combining styles and techniques, do you find yourself thinking along those lines, say "renouncing light" or even adding light to capture the essence and permanence of the person or object that you are painting?

A: This is part of that challenge that I love so much. Abstract art is often abused. Abstract art must have a life of its own: Its own depths and stories and contrast and composition. It's so much more than a few splashes of color or lines. Combining my realistic figures onto the abstract field pushes

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the challenge to a new level. I must always consider the effect of light and contrast, how far to push the depth of the abstract not to influence the figure, and vice versa.

Q: You did a portrait of Picasso that seems to give him a boyish quality about the face, as well as an unexpected calmness. He is usually portrayed as mischievous, brooding, his sexual and creative energy just beneath the surface ready to burst forth. His emotional volatility is usually very evident. Why did you choose to portray him as you did?

A: The persona of an artist is the same as any other person, magnified times ten. Studying Picasso, I often found myself reading between the lines. It is my belief that his “boyish quality” allowed his imagination to create such wondrous works. He didn’t allow himself to be restrained by society’s rules and restrictions. He possessed that “what if” factor and he was very comfortable with it. That is what I wanted to portray in his portrait.

Q: Your artistic vision is unique. Yet like any artist there is an “echo,” of artists from different expressions and techniques. In some of your paintings, one can perceive the influence of Picasso and Salvador Dali’s surrealism, and Picasso’s realism and cubism in the way you emphasize harmony and curvilinear lines. How much inspiration did you derive from these artists during your early development as an artist?

A: I love surrealism. I find myself injecting surrealism, whether subtle or not, into all my paintings. The artists that fueled my creativity in my early development were Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Leonardo Da Vinci, and John Singer Sargent. Dali and Picasso for the obvious, Sargent for his wondrous use of line, color, lighting, tonals and composition, Da Vinci... well, for his magnificent genius. When painting my figures, I often stand back from the easel and ask myself, “What would John or Leonardo do here?” If I find my figures are too realistic, too much in line with photo-realism, I will scrape them down and start over. I want that “painterly” look, that single brush stroke that Sargent would use to highlight the lobe of an ear, or Da Vinci would use to emphasize a muscle.

Q: You have done paintings under the umbrella category of Emotionalism.” These are emotionally and psychologically an intense dialogue between yourself and the viewer. Would you say that these are strong feminist statements? Or are they more a part of that self-analysis between yourself and your environment? Or are they both?

A: This series is definitely a self-analysis. Pain, infidelity, deception, and lies are an incendiary, and the result cannot help but be intense. I held nothing back in creating these paintings. I don’t regret that. I also know whatever emotion I portray is not singular to me. I receive feedback from viewers who tell me “you have told my story.” We are all creatures of emotion. Sometimes it’s necessary to “see” the plain truth, lay it out like a cheap buffet.

Q: Your Figurative paintings reveal a naturalistic and graceful movement of the human body. There is a lightness or airiness that you capture in how you use space. The human body is so changeable and subtle. What are some of the quintessential elements that you look for when painting a human figure?

A: I want my figures to “move.” I want that sensation of an underlying energy, as if they could instantly change pose or position if you glanced away. I must constantly balance between solid form and the impression of space. I don’t always achieve it; there are often battles between me and the canvas (did I mention my scraping tool is always handy?). Use of color and the direction of light and shadow often help me achieve this.

Q: Recently you have been addressing the issue of the slaughter of horses and the sale of horsemeat for human consumption. In the past there were foreign owned slaughterhouses in the United States. The meat was shipped to markets in Europe and Asia. Why is this now a concern, and why are you involved in raising this issue?

A: The horse was recognized at a very early stage in human development as an important role in commerce, social interaction, and mobility. Early man didn’t saddle cows or pigs or goats and ride across the plains in search of food, adventure, and a new life. It was the horse. I understand the arguments of the proponents that many horses are neglected. Yet, I feel it is our responsibility to give this noble animal a better chance. With our intellect we must find a way to do this differently. We owe that to the horse. I was raised on a ranch, and I know the bond that is created between man and horse is not fiction.

I also read the articles of the proponents, their boasting of this being a sixty-five billion dollars a year industry and realized in today's greed filled society, this is not about "saving the horse."

It's about the money.

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Shane

Great interview with some really interesting topics discussed. I find Maude McDonald's art to be both personal and universal, and always challenging

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