

# Renee Pitts encourages artists' communities

Valerie Renee Pitts, watercolor artist, has been surrounded by creativity throughout her life.

"I grew up in a very creative home. My grandmother quilted, sewed and gardened and everything she did fascinated me because there was an element of art and discovery for me. My mother was very creative. She made dollhouses from cardboard boxes and doll clothes out of scraps of fabric. She taught me to paint and sew from an early age. From her I learned problem solving through art because she was always reusing and remaking things through her sewing, painting and creating. As a young woman she began working at the Blue Ridge Pottery in Erwin. Today the dishes are highly collectible.

"I remember the first time I stood at the easel with a big brush and an apron during my kindergarten class. I loved art and knew it was something important to my life," Pitts says.

Pitts began with watercolor as a teenager and has pursued it throughout her life. She taught art in public and private schools, such as Science Hill High School Johnson City, Tennessee, Dobyn's Bennett High School, Kingsport Tennessee, and Brentwood Academy, Brentwood, Tennessee. Teaching children meant she had to learn different media in order to pass them along to her students.

"It was great for me because I could explore and experiment with different mediums. I found the medium of oil and have devoted a lot of time to the discipline the last few years. It is very different from watercolor, but I am finding that my watercolor helps me to paint more freely in oils and my oils help me to refine my watercolors. It is a good partnership of mediums for me," she says.

One of Pitts' teachers, Rob Erdle, not only had a great effect on her artistic style, he is one of her greatest influences.

"I began watercolor learning the traditional watercolor approach, saving the white, not using anything to make white or add white to the paper, drawn out and carefully planned compositions that took painstaking careful attention to detail. And then I took a class from Rob Erdle, a watercolorist who taught at North Texas State University. He had lived in Japan for a while, and his style reflected that influence. However, he had his own take on the medium. It was bold, large, and he experimented with use of different watercolor mediums, redefining the perimeters of watercolor for me. Very abstract, free, large, and nature inspired; his style spoke to me.

"I learned so much from him and am grateful for his sharing his life's work so freely. He had just been diagnosed with cancer and wanted his life's work to be passed on, so he poured himself into teaching us, passionately teaching, coaxing and encouraging us to push forward in new ways with the medium. It was life changing for me. He died not much longer after I took the class.

"So, after that time I began to experiment more, paint larger, freer, use much more water and less restriction on my work. I use a sketchbook to plan out the piece and then refer to it to paint freely. But I rarely, if ever, draw a design on the paper. If it is not exact, that is great. It is part of the process. I also use watercolor in planning other artwork such as quilting and my oil paintings. They are sketches for planning but can be developed further as watercolor paintings," she says.

Watercolor is often described as a difficult medium. Pitts says that it can be, especially if you adhere to the strict traditional rules of watercolor.

"Saving the white of the paper is very important and must be done to have value in your work. That can be done through mediums such as frisket or tape or wax. I prefer to use those sparingly because when you remove them, they leave a blank space that is blinding and sometimes incohesive and distracting for me. I paint clear water on areas I want to paint, following with paint later, leaving the paper dry to preserve the white. I then begin with focusing on those areas by creating value around them (negative painting) so my composition flows. I complete a sketch first and then use that to help me keep my values intact. I use lots of water, lift paint using different methods, and use gouache when needed to lighten an area," Pitts says.



Renee Pitts' "It's Mahonia, Honey," 14x18, plein air

Her other influences are watercolorists such as Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and contemporary artists Alvaro Castagnet, Yuko Nagayama Keiko Tanabe, and Yong Hong Zhong.

"The relationship of life, nature, emotions, joys, and sorrows of life, the extraordinarily ordinary experience of life reflected in the work of these artists make me want to pick up a brush and try harder to create my perspective of this life we live.

"When I moved to Nashville, I was introduced to an art world that opened up many experiences and opportunities for me. I learned about plein air and began painting in oils. The artist group, The Chestnut Group, is a group of plein air artists who paint the rural landscape that is changing quickly due to the spread of urban communities. The goal of these plein air artists, both oil and watercolor, is to preserve through paintings the beauty of an area before it is changed forever by urban sprawl.

"During my time there I met some incredible artists, and I continue to follow them and take classes from them. One in particular, Dawn Whitelaw, has influenced me considerably in my art journey. What I have learned from oils is transferred to watercolor and that has made a huge difference in my work. When I moved back to this area, I found the plein air movement had begun here. I joined the plein air group, Northeast Plein Art Painters or 'Just Plein Nuts,' and these painters are an inspiration and motivation to me weekly as we paint together the beautiful landscapes of our area.

"Our goals are much the same as The Chestnut Group, preserving the integrity and beauty of our area before it is quickly changed from rural to urban and the memories are lost," she says.

Their plein air group is open to anyone. They have a Facebook page, Just Plein Nuts, and information about paint outs is listed there weekly.

"I don't believe an artist can survive without a community, and we are so rich in our area with artistic communities. I am a member of the Kingsport Art Guild, The Just Plein Nuts Plein Air group, The Abingdon Arts Depot, and participate regularly in shows for these groups as well as the McKinney Center