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Art Worlds

Renee McGinnis '84 expresses her hopes and worries for the planet with a painting style as varied as it is passionate.



A Greater Garden – oil on canvas, 36" x 36"

Story by Tim Obermiller



***Born Again* – oil on linen, 48” x 36”**

“The building in this painting is the Capitol as it looked after the Civil War. The country had gone through a tremendous change and a painful period. And the Capitol, the central intelligence of our nation, wasn’t even finished yet. The cranes, the scaffolding create crosses, like Calvary. Sometimes when they see this painting, people are frightened or disturbed by it. They think the clouds represent a volcanic eruption or a bomb. In fact, it’s just a great storm, and through great storms are often great renewals, too.”



Creator Couple – oil on canvas, 75” x 52”

“This painting was intended to remind us of how capable we are of doing so many things, yet we can’t resolve mistakes we keep making generation after generation. The couple are handing their children a gun and a doll. The toys symbolize the legacy of violence and overpopulation that we are handing our children.”



Global Momma – oil on canvas, 72” x 52”

Try to choose one painting that captures the essence of Renee McGinnis’s art and you may quickly change your mind. She has successfully ventured into so many styles that a display of her works could easily be mistaken for that of several different artists. On one canvas you might find a muscular human figure, skin luminous and supple enough to almost touch, and on the next an allegorical landscape — playful, weird, and disturbing all at once. Whimsical cattle float among clouds in one painting; in another, a mosaic of emerald-green shamrocks seems to stretch into infinity.

McGinnis, a 1984 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan’s School of Art, has allowed herself the liberty to change her style without regard to critical or commercial trends. “That’s something I’ve been criticized for, often, in Chicago,” she says. Art galleries “sometimes like to brand you. They like a consistent thing that they can sell, that the public knows at a glance who the artist is.

“But,” she adds, “I’m having fun and I’m not starving yet, so I continue to evolve at this point.”

Aside from the range and virtuosity of McGinnis’s work, its most consistent quality is a commitment to message. Even many of her more abstract paintings convey her concerns about the environment, overpopulation, greed, and an over-reliance on technology.

This last concern helped define McGinnis as an artist. When she was a little girl, growing up on her parents’ farm near Dwight, Ill., the family TV broke, “and my dad decided not to get a new one.” Not having a television in the home, she believes, “changed my life,” forcing her to find other diversions, such as a set of encyclopedias, a stack of old *National Geographic* magazines, and her art.

McGinnis told this story to art students attending a lecture this January that accompanied her show at the Wakeley Gallery of the Joyce G. Eichhorn School of Arts Building. Unlike a lot of artists, McGinnis is not shy about talking about her work, or the inspiration behind it. Showing slides of her paintings, she even revealed who had modeled for her large-as-life figures — a list that includes her mom and an ex-boyfriend who clearly spent a lot of his time in the gym.

As an Illinois Wesleyan student, McGinnis says she was encouraged to use her art to express ideas. Her first painting class — taught by Miles Bair, director of the School of Art — inspired her to launch a series of iconic paintings depicting the lives of some of her personal heroes: Charles Darwin, Margaret Mead, Albert Einstein. After graduating from IWU, she continued her education at the University of Chicago, taking graduate-level classes in anthropology and sociology. During this time, she also made a living off her artistic talent by doing illustrations for collector’s plates, “the kind they sell in *TV Guide*,” she says, laughing.

At \$2,000 a plate, “I just couldn’t turn it down,” she says. But McGinnis was determined to “still try to be an artist and express those things that boil up inside of you that you just need to say before your eyes go bad and you get arthritis.” She met with early success with a series she began in the early ’90s. “I started using the figure as an allegory to say all I wanted to say about worries ... and all those things that you would want to change if you were God.”

McGinnis's realistic technique went against the grain of current art trends, but has been welcomed as a refreshing change by art critics and collectors. "These paintings are so well-executed," wrote one of those critics, Margaret Hawkins, "that we have to admire McGinnis's commitment to both ideas and technique, a breath of fresh air in an art world that is long on conceptual whimsy and short on craft."

With work that has been displayed in galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe — and even included in the White House collection of art during Bill Clinton's tenure as president — McGinnis is getting her fair share of exposure for an artist who remains hard to categorize. Millions more are exposed daily to McGinnis's talents through her work as an Emmy-winning graphics artist for Chicago TV station WGN's nationally aired newscasts.

Although her day job involves television, she still avoids the medium in her private life. McGinnis staunchly stands by the convictions that have energized her art for two decades, but lately her messages have blossomed with a newfound optimism.

Her current series, often painted on the backs of old, wooden doors she finds discarded in Chicago alleys, depict parched landscapes that have been rejuvenated with "all manner of vegetation, growth, and hope," as one art critic described them. In a world that seems to grow more dangerous and dire by the day, McGinnis wants to express life and renewal. "This one I could spend the rest of my life exploring," she says of the series. Perhaps this restless artist has found a home at last.



Palace Floor 3 – oil on found door, 30" x 78"