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NICOLE RENEE

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has been drawing since the moment her memories began. Stamped deep on those earliest of neurons is the undeniable record of fingers gripping pen or brush or pencil, and of eyes sucking in the world and its dizzying array of images. Aloneness gave her time to perfect her skills; tragedy prodded her to seek resolution. Or at the very least, understanding. Years later she was able to impart soul into a veneer of ink and graphite and acrylic layered on the flat world of a painting. Nicole has since emerged as one of Richmond's most gifted painters, an artist who imbues her works with personal narratives that suggest the universal.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH by REBECCA D'ANGELO

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Shana Stewart: Master of the Floral Arts

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

SHANA STEWART, owner of Sassy Snapdragon Florals, stands before a large table that is bare save for a single pair of straight blade pruning shears and a large green vase adorned with the portrait of a woman. Around the table there are several five gallon buckets that contain flowers and greenery. What she produces over the next hour and a half is not a cookie cutter arrangement, but rather a work of floral art. “Like a blank canvas in painting, you’re manifesting something from nothing,” Shana says gesturing toward the vase and its wide, empty mouth. “The creator creates out of nothing.”

Shana grew up in Brandermill and, while attending Clover Hill High School, took every class in art she could.

“All my electives were art,” she says. “Sculpture, photography, and crafts. That was the first time I ever used clay on the potter’s wheel. We also learned hand-building with coils, and how to make pinch pots, we also threw clay.”

After graduation she seriously considered attending the Savannah College of Art and Design, where a friend of hers studied. Instead she worked at Ruby Tuesdays and Applebees as a hostess. From a bartender she heard about Maharishi University of Management (formerly Maharishi International University) out in Fairfield, Iowa. Shana’s spiritual side led her to the Midwest. She became vegetarian, learned transcendental meditation, and ultimately convinced her parents to visit the college in the middle of Iowa. “So that’s where I ended up getting my bachelor of fine arts in ceramics with a minor in education,” says Shana. “Art is my meditation. And I love ceramics because it’s more three-dimensional and I’ve always been a tactile learner.”

As she talks, Shana grabs a handful of broad-leafed greenery called lemon leaf, checks the height, and snips three or four inches off of the lower stems, then thrusts them as a clump into the mouth of the green vase. In among the lemon leaf, she artfully places complex branches of eucalyptus, and as the leaves gently collide there are short bursts of a smell that combines pine and mint and honey.



“This is what I use as my base,” Shana says. “All the little stems hold the flowers in place, so I make like a grid. I get this big cluster of greenery together, nip off the stems to get the right height.” Her pruning shears crunch through the eucalyptus stems. Then, Shana begins shoving much taller stems of curly willow in the rear of the arrangement. “These are my tall elements to give it height, to make it a little showy,” she says.

After graduating from high school, Shana went on hiatus. She moved out to Corvallis, Oregon in the lush Willamette Valley where she worked for about six months on an organic fruit and vegetable farm. With the money she saved, Shana moved further west just outside Pahoa on Hawaii’s Big Island. While there she visited a self-sustaining organic farm that embraced permaculture practices. During her ten months there, Shana made drawings and learned the basics of glass-blowing.

She returned to Richmond just three weeks after 9/11, settled in the Fan, worked in the gift shop at the VMFA for a time, ran some kilns in Nga Nguyen-Weaver’s studio and then got a job with Vogue Flowers, where she worked at their various locations for about a decade.

“For part of that time I was just a minion working in the front there helping customers, which is what I love,” says Shana. “I’ve never had a desk job, I’ve never worked for corporate America.” While at Vogue, she learned basic elements of design, as well the names of flowers and how to tell the difference between a larkspur and a delphinium. “I learned things like the stair step effect that you get when you have some flowers cut short, some medium, some taller,” she says. “You want it to look visually appealing for your eye to move from the bottom to the top.”

After her stint with Vogue, Shana

took a job with a mother and daughter shop on South Side called Flowers Make Sense. “They were from New York, and were very much into weddings and also style and fashion, keeping up with what’s new and trendy,” Shana says of Flowers Make Sense. “That’s where I got the majority of my wedding work experience. Not only was I doing the wedding work behind the scenes, I was helping customers, and sitting with brides-to-be, learning what they wanted. That’s where my wedding experience from start to finish comes from. Where I would sit with clients at the consultation, make the stuff, and even deliver it.”

Not long after that, Shana received her certificate in massage therapy and worked at James River Massage Therapy off Hungry Springs Road, and later for Sense of Serenity off of Mountain Road. And she worked two years at Lavender Fields Herb Farm in Glen Allen.

About five years ago, sitting at her kitchen table with a notebook and pen, Shana began drawing up plans to start her own floral design business. She wrote down a series of possible names for her new company, ultimately deciding on Sassy Snapdragon Florals. She liked the alliteration which matched that of her own name.

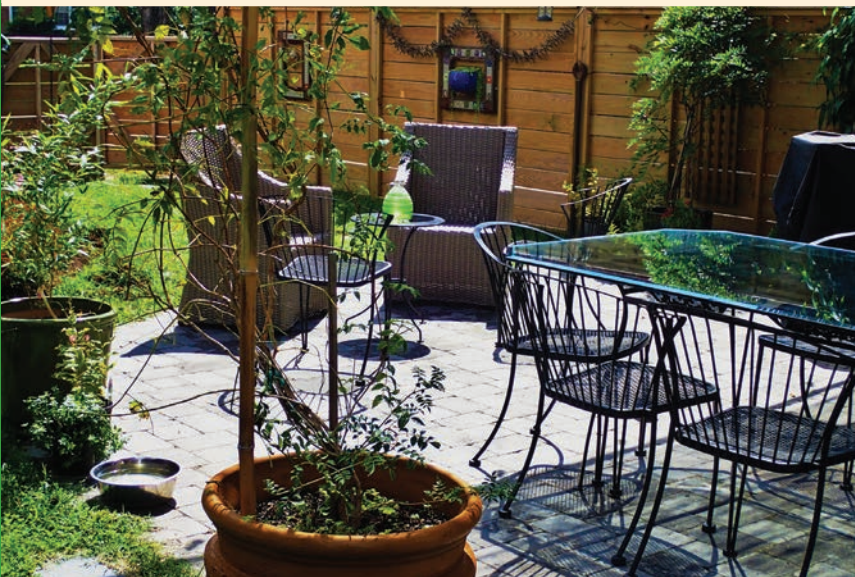
“So I went to Henrico County and got a business license,” Shana says. “And I already had established relationships with some of the florists around here, and had done a few weddings on my own over the years.”

In the intervening years, her business has flourished. “Now the flower business runs itself, and it’s slowly growing,” says Shana. “I only hire one or two people as needed and that allows me to keep my prices very competitive. I typically only do one wedding a weekend, whether that’s a six or seven hundred where they’re just getting a few bouquets, or five thousand dollar wedding where they’re going to the Country Club of Virginia and getting huge centerpieces and decorating their carts.”

Along with other special events, from corporate functions to anniversary parties, Shana also offers a flower arrangement of the month. “People can pre-purchase flower arrangements that they can send to their clients, or have in their office or in their homes.

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BUSINESS PROFILE



That's an aspect of my business that I want to develop more. It's going to be the designer's choice and seasonally I try and use whatever is fresh local. I have three local, organic flower farmers out toward Montpelier (Hanover County) that I deal with."

Shana pulls forth a number of heather-like stems called Boronia and begins to thrust them into the growing floral arrangement. "I don't always have a vision for design," she says. "But for this one I wanted to do a garden style, because I'm going to cluster all the similar things together because that's how it grows in the garden."


Next come the parrot tulips whose blooms mock the head of a tropical bird. After stripping away the leaves, and giving the stems a fresh cut, Shana carefully presses each delicate stem into the vase. It is all coming together now—a work of art unto itself. She begins adding small clusters of button-like flowers—neutral in color, textured and incongruous.

"I really love the sculptural aspect of floral arrangement, and combing the organic with the inorganic," says Shana. "I do like texture, and want to have all the different elements come together. Elements of interest and surprise. It can be incorporating fruit or cutting

open a pomegranate and having that in there, or putting kumquats in there and making it look very lush and full. And of course I think fine arts correlate with floral design because it's all about composition, line, color, texture, all that stuff."

And then she grabs a half dozen roses, fresh-cutting the stems, and then stabbing them into the arrangement as the just the right places, stepping back to look at her work like a painter at her canvas, moving forward and readjusting a stem or filling in gap with greenery. It is almost entirely done, and you realize it couldn't be made any other way.

"Process is what it's all about," Shana says. "An art professor would often say, 'Let's take a look at these bowls you've made. We're going to get rid of all of them except for one.' I think what he was teaching is that it's really about the process. That is what we love as artists."

Shana Stewart then approaches each of the roses which are the color of the flesh of a peach. She brings her lips close to them and puffs out a slight breath of air, and the petals open, just slightly, and now the arrangement is done. 

Shana Stewart
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Marti's Horses: Feeling Love

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

MARTI BROWN—dressed in blue jeans, a New England Patriots jacket, gloves, skull cap, and olive green wellies—leads me to the barn where her horse Zak is slowly chewing a clump of hay. In his stall there is a buffer from the wind that is a perpetual gust moving out of the southeast. The day is bright, the sky blue, and the temperature well below freezing. This barn sits on a couple acres atop a knoll overlooking a pond ringed by oak, holly and scrub pine in the far western reaches of Chesterfield County, literally a stone's throw away from Powhatan.

When Zak is finished munching, he trots out of the barn and joins Fenway, a miniature horse, chest-high and fully grown. Fenway follows Zak around like a puppy. The two meet up with Raven, the latest addition to Marti Brown's horses.

"I've had Zak since the day he was born thirteen years ago," says Marti.

Zak is a stately bay with the trademark black mane, tail and lower legs. A white blaze from the center of his forehead zigzags down to his muzzle, ending abruptly at the entrance to his right nostril.

"He is just a super, special horse with a really great demeanor," Marti tells me. "And he's very good with kids."

We hear the crunch of tires on the gravel and turn to see a van and two cars come to stop, doors open, and half-a-dozen kids, along with teachers and other staff, spill out. The kids can't contain their excitement. They race to the barn and surround Zak, who seems to eye each one of them with a pleased intensity. Most Fridays these kids come from their home base at Dominion Academy on Richmond's North Side. It's all part of a program Marti started almost a year ago with both Dominion and the Faison School.

"I get the kids here and I just try to make them smile, make them feel good about themselves," Marti says a little later. "And to get them to do things that they can do, and just get them to reach their full potential as far as taking care of the horses, riding the horses, brushing and grooming them.

Just a smile on their faces brings a smile to mine."

The abundance of smiles in the barn must bring sheer delight to Marti. The kids, all grins and laughter, take turns brushing Zak's coat from withers to flank, always stroking in the same direction. One student takes a comb and begins working on Zak's coal black mane.

My son Charles, who is among the kids, squats down and deftly grips Zak's fetlock, which is just below the knee, and the horse's leg curls, presenting the hoof. Using a tool called a hoofpick and brush, Charles digs out manure that is captured in Zak's frog, a triangular groove on the underside of the hoof. Once he works the dirt and manure out of the frog, he brushes away whatever remnants are left.

When the kids have finished grooming Zak, Marti hold up a sling of sorts made of leather straps, and stainless steel rings and buckles.

"What is this called?" she asks.

"The halter," one boy says. Then he and another student fit the halter over Zak's muzzle, up his forehead, and over his ears.

Marti lays what looks like a small, thick blanket over the slight sway of Zak's back.

"What is this?" she wants to know.

"The saddle pad," a boy says, and Marti nods.

Two kids grab the saddle from its roost, and fit it over the pad. One of the boys feeds the girth strap under Zak's barrel, and the other boy, standing on the opposite side of the horse, grabs it, and secures it to the saddle.

"You've got to make sure it's real tight," he tells me, as he pulls down on the leather strap.

"If you don't make it tight," says the other boy. "The saddle will slip off."

"And so will you," his friend says.

"Do any of you guys remember what this is called?" says Marti, pointing to the saddle.

"A stirrup," someone says.

"That's right."

Marti leads Zak out of the shelter of the barn and onto a flat, open area,



Marti readies Zak for his encounter with a group of kids from Dominion Academy. Charles takes great care while attending to Zak's needs.

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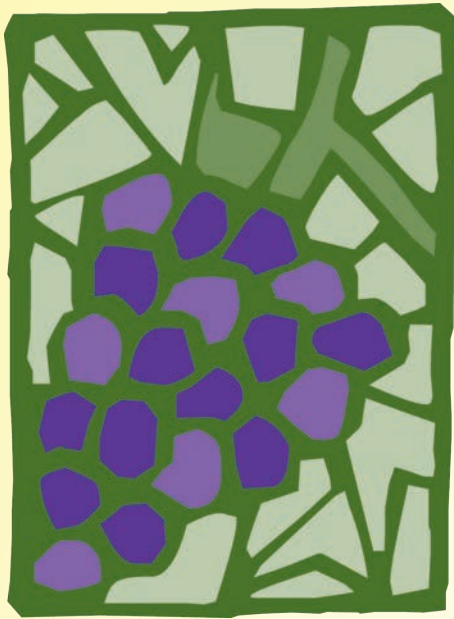
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next to a large cooler that serves as a mounting block. Standing on top of the cooler, Charles fits his foot into the stirrup, lifts himself up, grabbing the saddle horn, then swings his other leg over the saddle, and settles in, hugging the flanks of the horse with his legs.

Marti leads the horse with a tether until they enter a gated area. She removes the tether and clips on the reins which she hands to Charles, and then he is on his own, arms lifted, tugging on the reins to guide Zak around a series of orange traffic cones, and then along the perimeter of the fence.

The other kids watch on the other side of the fence, each waiting his turn to ride. "It's like a car that can love you," one of them says of horseback riding. "Like that guy who had a talking car on that old TV show."

"Knight Rider?" another kid says, and the boy nods.


Madeline Hartsock, autism services coordinator at Dominion Academy, tells me how this kind of hippotherapy helps her charges. "So we get out here, and they get to get in the barn and do some work," she says. "We work on some of the goals they're working on in school, as well as social skills and empathy, and just getting out here and engaging."

When the last kid has ridden, and the saddle and pad, the bit and bridle are removed and stowed away, Zak retires to his stable, and Marti tells me a thing or two about horses.

"It's hard to explain," she says. "Horses just have this thing, you can just relax and forget about everything else in the world, and just get on that horse. Getting on something so big seems to make the kids happy. They seem to love coming here and riding. And horses just have that connection."

Charles would certainly agree with this. We have come to visit Marti and her horses at other times, and Charles had developed a true bond with Zak. "He is very kind," Charles says. "I feel like he has a soul and a good heart. Every animal has feelings and emotions, and you can tell Zak cares about the kids. The first time I got on Zak, I felt really nervous, and didn't want to get on. After a few times I became relaxed and got really used to him. Now, I hop right on. I'm not scared anymore."

A student standing next to my son, nods along with Charles's words.

"You know what I like," this student says. "I like hugging horses. I feel love when I hug them." 

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NICOLE RENEE

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THE INTERSECTION
OF CRAFT AND IDEA



Sofia, “the embodiment of mother, the cosmic mother, the giver and taker of life”, will be a part of Nicole’s show, “Little Birds” at Eric Schindler Gallery, opening on March 16.

NICOLE RANDALL, LEGS TUCKED UP UNDER HER, beneath the tent of a voluminous, floral printed skirt, bends forward at the waist, at times bringing her face right up to the thin brush she uses to detail a painting she later describes as a sort of self-portrait—“What it’s like to be me. One of me is always pulling the other. One’s out of control.” This work, along with a dozen others, will be on display from March 16 through April at Eric Schindler Gallery, an exhibition entitled “Little Birds”, a slight nod, perhaps, to Anaïs Nin, but more than that, an homage to birds, dead and alive, scattered through these paintings, each one a purposeful symbol that embodies freedom, artistic perspective, and the soaring human soul, beyond the reach of nets and arrows.

THROUGH THE LENSES

of the black-rimmed, cat-eye glasses Nicole’s eyes radiate a blue light. We move from her studio to the dining room table, and she travels back in time to her girlhood home in a valley town near the confluence of the twin forks of the Shenandoah River, a place called Front Royal. When she was just five years old her mother moved to Virginia Beach, and Nicole was raised by her father and stepmother. Though she would see her mother for a week or two in the summer, questions plagued the girl. “Why doesn’t my mom want me? What’s wrong with me? She had two other kids with another man. Why did she keep them and not me?”

But Nicole’s father was always there, in her eyes, almost god-like. This, too: her father was a free-lance draftsman, which was how he made a living. So there was always an ample supply of vellum, tracing paper, mechanical pencils, compasses and French curves around the house. Nicole kept her father’s light table—a large, heavy affair—tucked under her bed, and whenever she could, she would slide it out with great effort and begin tracing everything under the sun. She was teaching herself how things looked—an arm, a face, a nose, a horse, a tree, anything. This kind of obsessive drawing started when Nicole was a very young girl, and it would never stop.

In both middle school and high school she took art classes, and always excelled. Nicole learned to use her skill as a sort “Get out of Jail” card. Say she failed a spelling test, and her father gave her a stern warning. She might show him a new drawing she had done, and he would rave about how talented she

was. He’d forgotten about the spelling test altogether. A teacher would say, “If you paid half as much attention to other stuff as you do to drawing, you’d have straight As.” With her artwork, Nicole could always get positive feedback.

In that same time frame, Nicole became fascinated by fashion. She began sketching masterpieces in great detail, learning how to shade properly to bring added dimension. She loved the painting of Jacques Louis David and his detailed attention to the clothing of the period. Nicole would copy a painting of Mary Cassat, entirely in pencil, getting every fold in the fabric of the dress the subject wore just right. She was fascinated by the stories of women out of history. She drew sketches of Josephine Bonaparte, Marie Antoinette, and her own version of Mary, Queen of Scots, ascending the gallows with her dog hidden under her skirts. Over the years Nicole filled scores of sketchbooks with her drawings.

The art room at Warren County High School was Nicole’s sanctuary. It overlooked the Prospect Hill Cemetery, so there was that air of melancholy. But the art room was warm, sometimes hot, because of the potters’ kiln. Here is where she found members of her own tribe, a place protected from the popular kids, where she and her art peers could just be themselves. And when she was junior she had a teacher named Martha Lynn Nelson, a friend and mentor, who would expose Nicole to a painter who would change the budding artist’s life.

“She had boards up on the walls of different artists and time periods,” Nicole tells me. “And I can still remember turning around, and seeing a painting by

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D’ANGELO



Gustav Klimt. And I was like, ‘Hang on, who’s this guy?’ He’s gilded, and the clothing is painted differently. I was sixteen or seventeen. I was sheltered. I was a PBS kid. Seeing that grand illuminating style of his opened a whole new painterly world to me.”

Remembering that time in her life, Nicole now realizes how important it was in her artistic development. In many ways it made her understand the importance of narrative in painting. “I was drawn to the whole romantic aspect of their lives, and it had to involve tragedy,” she says. “I needed tragedy to make me want to draw it. Tragedy and fashion. It made me always wonder, as a kid, what led Marie Antoinette to that, what happened here, why were these people thinking this way? It was never topical. I wanted to know interrelationship aspects of all of this stuff. Which is exactly what I do now.”

When I suggest that much art today lacks that kind of depth, Nicole nods.

“It has no soul,” she says. “And what are you without a soul? You can be good at art, but that doesn’t make you an artist.”

After graduating high school, Nicole was accepted into VCU’s Art Foundation Program. “I drew that crumpled up piece of paper, I did the perspective of the corner of the room,” she says, laughing. “I did all that. And, you know, the AFO is a really great pro-

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gram. They worked you hard. I didn't get sucked into anything else at that point because I was still in the dorm and people would be in the hallway working on their projects so it was this big friendly competitive kind of atmosphere. And then I loved the whole critique aspect of it. I loved bringing my work into class, and having a teacher look at it, and everyone giving their feedback. I even miss that now, I have nobody to do that with, hardly at all, except for friends, and then I feel like I'm bugging them. I miss critiques."

Nicole majored in painting and print-making, and things began going south. "AFO was wonderful," she says. "But then you get a bunch of disgruntled art professors who don't seem like they want to be there, and they push you, they want to pigeonhole you into something. So you're either a painter or you're an illustrator."

Some professors actively criticized Nicole's work because it was too representational. They would remind her that they were of the Bauhaus and the conceptual persuasion.

"And they would just fawn and swoon all over these kids who were just using giant brushes and making these huge swoops across the canvas," she remembers. "They just loved that. They ate it with a spoon. And I couldn't do that kind of stuff. How was I to put my soul into that? It's not who I was."

Some professors recommended that she change her major to communication arts because her work was so illustrative. "So I did," says Nicole. "I applied for CA, communication arts and design, and they said, 'Well, we don't know what to do with you here because you're too painterly. I am not making any of this up.'"

Things got progressively worse throughout her sophomore year, and then she would hit rock bottom as a junior. "I was declining," she says. "I'm getting sadder and sadder. I'm drinking more, I'm cutting class. The only teacher in that year that I gave two s***s about was David Freed. He talked to me like a real person, he didn't shove me aside, or make me think my questions were dumb, or



Nicole at home with Eisen and Anelie.

what I was doing was not right. There was something about him that I connected with. He listened."

Depression began to draw her in. To top it off she moved into an apartment on Hell Block, just east of West Grace Street's Suitcase Alley. "People getting stabbed, prostitutes, homeless people ranting up and down the alley," Nicole says. "The glorious 1100 block. And you had the slumlords. Good Lord, you turn on the light and the roaches

just fall out of the fixture. This is what I have to do to be a real, starving artist, I told myself. I was Modigliani then."

College classwork was no longer a priority. "There was no going to class if you lived on that block because it was just a constant party," says Nicole. "People would just show up at your door with handfuls of weed. And I was like, 'Come on in, I've got a candy dish for that.'"

And then to make matters worse, Nicole became involved with the man who



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would become her first husband. “He was a suicidal alcoholic,” she says. “A match made in heaven, but guess what, I was going to change him. The love of me was going to turn him straight.”

The pair finally married when Nicole was in her late twenties, but it wasn’t going to last. Her husband’s drinking had gotten out of control. He would down eighteen beers a night, then have Nicole buy him a final six-pack up at the convenience store. By then they lived west of the Boulevard, near Lafayette and Cutshaw, and they worked at Ellwood Thompson’s.

“The drunks got worse all the time,” she recalls. “Sometimes he would black out and punch me in the gut. I remember one night he came up to me with a pencil because he thought I was somebody else. He came at me with a pencil like he was going to stab me. And I was like, ‘This is really it. I’m gone.’”

But then she talked herself out of it. “I wouldn’t leave a cancer patient,” she told herself. “Why would I leave an alcoholic? They can’t help it.”

There was a final straw though. For

some reason, her former husband would, when drunk, warm himself with a hairdryer. “So one morning, I woke up and he had passed out on the floor using a hair dryer to heat himself,” says Nicole. “And he had third-degree burns on his leg.”

Not long after that incident, she sat across from him at a booth in the Village Restaurant. The jukebox played “Love Will Tear Us Apart”, and Nicole held the divorce papers in her hands. “It was heart-wrenching,” she says. “It was the hardest thing I ever had to do.”

She met, and later married Chris Godsey, a blacksmith known for his restoration work in Richmond, and the couple have two children, Eisen and Anelie. Her first husband ultimately committed suicide. And it weighed on Nicole. “There was note, but I don’t know what was in it,” she says. “One of my very best friend’s is a funeral director and she prepared him. He had a lock of my hair in his wallet. How do you mourn that? How is it socially acceptable to mourn that person?”

Meanwhile, her life had moved on with two children and a husband, a family

she loves. But for years, Nicole had put her painting aside. She had tended to the needs of a grown man, and then became a mother devoting herself full-time to her children. She and Chris created a cozy home in Lakeside, where drama was not on the menu.

A few years back, Nicole entered her son in the Waldorf School, and things began to change. “Life didn’t really start to renew again until Eisen went to school, and I became friends with a different set of people,” she says. “All of a sudden I had friendships that were not based around drinking and partying. These were just real friends.”

One of those new-found friends, Ophelia von Ludwig, was immediately taken by Nicole’s art. (Incidentally, Ophelia’s father-in-law is David Freed, the one professor Nicole had given two s***s about.)

By then Nicole had begun painting again, and slowly discovered her own voice. Ophelia encouraged her to show her work to Kirsten Gray, owner of Eric Schindler Gallery. Nicole was reluctant at first. “No one is interested in this representational, fairy tale crap,”

she told herself.

Eventually, she sent an email to Kirsten, along with images of her work. And the response was almost immediate. Kirsten loved the paintings and offered a Nicole a solo show. She put the show together in less than a year. “I could finally say I’m an artist,” Nicole says. “I’m with the Schindler Gallery.”

Nicole shows me a piece called “We Breathe in the Dead”, one of the works she created for that first exhibit. “I just feel that the air is thick with souls of the dead,” she says. “We breathe it in, and we breathe it out. They’re just fluid, and they’re everywhere, and you can’t get around it.”

She remembers that year clearly, that year everything changed. “It was so cool having a goal, and I just painted and painted and painted and painted,” says Nicole. “It was like meeting an old friend. It was a little difficult. I stumbled along the way. And always self-doubt gets in the way, but that keeps you critical. And as you can see my style has completely changed because when you’re working day after day af-

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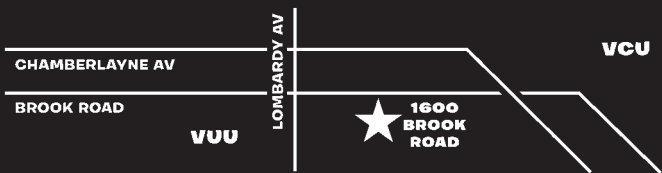
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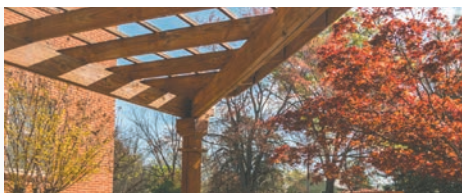


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ter day after day it's so awesome how you progress, which is what you're supposed to do. Right?"

At the end of that first show, Nicole had sold all twelve paintings. "I said to myself, 'Oh my gosh, people really like this,'" she says. "I was like, 'Well, okay, maybe I can do this.'"

Immediately after that first show, Kirsten invited Nicole to take part in a two-person exhibition. "I don't think you should sit out too long," Kirsten told her. "You're new and we need to keep you out there."

And now Nicole is in the final preparation stage for her third show at Schindler. We move back to her studio.

She shows me a large painting of a woman in a ballooning white dress and a black bolero jacket with a lace collar. Her head is thrown back in resigned fatigue, her arms weary. There is a dead bird in her lap, two living birds near her right arm. Behind her a sunburst like the halo of a goddess. And throughout the painting scores of tiny details, each charged with meaning.

"This is Sophia," says Nicole. "Which is the embodiment of mother, the cosmic mother, the giver and taker of life."

She shows me more of these new paintings. One of the maiden-mother-crone, another called "The Son of Justice. I look closely at each one, searching for the meanings in the details.

"I put little aspects of myself into everything," Nicole says. "If there's something in the painting of mine, it's there for a reason. It symbolizes something. Maybe I'm the only one who knows what it means, but I don't care, I like it that way. Or maybe they're little nods to my friends. I don't see how you can have a connection without that? And often-times I'll have to make up a story about what's going on with those people."

Then she drops to the floor in front of the painting she is still working on. Again, she brings face close to the surface of the painting, and begins patient brushwork, periodically straightening up so she can look down on it, then bending forward again with her brush thrust out.

"Art is the intersection of craft and idea," says Nicole. "You can have craft all day long, but if you don't have an idea, you have nothing. And people filled with ideas who have no craft, have nothing." **NJ**

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VCU Arts Awards Grant Project Promotes Virginia's State Parks

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

TWO COMMUNICATION art students at VCU, both seniors, were recently awarded a grant to create a series of old-school graphic posters highlighting some of Virginia's most precious land holdings—her state parks.

Catherine McGuigan was holed up in her art studio, between projects, when her mind began to wonder, and to synthesize, the twin mothers of invention.

"I have these flights of fancy where I get really set on doing a thing," she says. "I wanted to do something that I was passionate about, and I love our state parks."

In her mind's eyes, she saw those iconic posters created in the late 1930s and early 1940s through one of FDR's brilliant New Deal programs, the Work Projects Administration. These were hand-printed silk screens, melding illustration and graphic design, and they promoted America's most sacred treasures—her National Parks.

"They have a unique graphic style to them," says Catherine. "They're illustrations, but they're also graphics. So they do a good job combining those two elements, and they've got that clean blocky text."

As the seed of this idea was germinating, Catherine called friend and fellow comm art student, Madison Hall. When the call came, Madi, as she's known to most, just so happened to

be hiking deep within the Pisgah National Forest just off the Blue Ridge Parkway near Boone, North Carolina. While she hiked, listening to her friend's idea, Madi nodded along, made suggestions, and when the two got together later in the summer, they began hatching a plan.

It seems like a particularly appropriate time for this project considering the current administration's continuous assaults on our public lands.

"I don't remember when he (the current president) stopped a lot of the funding for the National Parks, but it was pretty early on," Catherine says.

"He wouldn't allow park employees to use social media to advocate for the National Parks," says Madi.

Catherine nods. "So, they have an alt National Parks," she says.

"We want to engage people to advocate for our parks," Madi says. "That's part of it."

Between now and next November, the pair plan to visit at least a dozen of the state's 36 parks, and create twelve posters. At this point, Madi and Catherine have visited five state parks, and have already begun rough sketches.

Along with the posters, they will also create T-shirts, bandanas and other merchandise.

"Some of the proceeds will go to funding for the state parks," says Catherine. "I like an idea like that; I



have certain values."

Not long after the pair began planning the project, Catherine submitted a proposal for funding to VCUarts. In her request for an undergraduate research grant, Catherine wrote, "The goal of this project will be to showcase the beauty of Virginia's State Parks while exploring two traditional printing techniques. Our hope is to create a series of posters that help illustrate what the parks have to offer . . . This is meant to be an immersive process to learn techniques we are not taught in our current discipline." The proposed budget—about \$1,500—included everything from park passes to art supplies.

Early in January, Madi and Catherine received a letter from VCUarts notifying them that they had been awarded the grant.

"I hope you are as proud as we are as this opportunity is very competitive," wrote Andrew Ilnicki of VCUarts. "Each year many creative projects are submitted and the selection decision is a difficult one."

One of the objectives of the grant is to teach Catherine and Madi traditional printing methods. "We budgeted for linoleum and screen printing," Catherine explains. "To make it a research grant we had to experiment with different techniques. We're not taught any of this stuff in comm arts today. It's almost all purely digital, and they've

kind of steered away from traditional media, or teaching the foundations of it. That is something we are going to try to delve into especially with a teacher-mentor type person."

"I'm super into print media and stuff like that," says Madi

"I've always liked printing," Catherine says. "I almost went into painting and print-making."

The first three posters Madi and Catherine plan will feature Shenandoah River, Kiptopeke and Westmoreland state parks. After that it will be on to Douthat, then Fairy Stone. "And definitely Grayson Highlands," says Catherine. "There are wild horses there, and at the top of Mount Rogers they have one of the only remaining red spruce forests in Virginia." Catherine, a true double-major who will also receive a bachelor's degree in environmental studies, adds: "The micro-climate that's up there is so significant that it is the only place in Virginia where the red spruce can grow."

"We'll have ten or twelve done by November," Madi says.

"We have it staggered so we'll go to one or two parks a month," Catherine says. "Once we get the process underway, we'll have a more structured timeline."

Catherine talks about the red-orange bluffs of Horse Head Cliffs at Westmoreland State Park, and how they contrast with the rich blue-grey marl of the shoreline, which is littered with fossils, vertebrae of whales and teeth of sharks from 15 million years ago, along with our own state fossil—Chesapeake jeffersonius.

"We're always looking for the perfect image to reflect the park," says Madi.

"Or images," Catherine says. "Sometimes there are a number of images."

In lieu of signatures, they plan to create a sort of cartouche, a monogram combining both their names that can be stamped on all their work, like the seal of German Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer. And after college, these two talented young women plan to open their own print studio in Richmond. **NS**



Catherine McGuigan and Madison Hall



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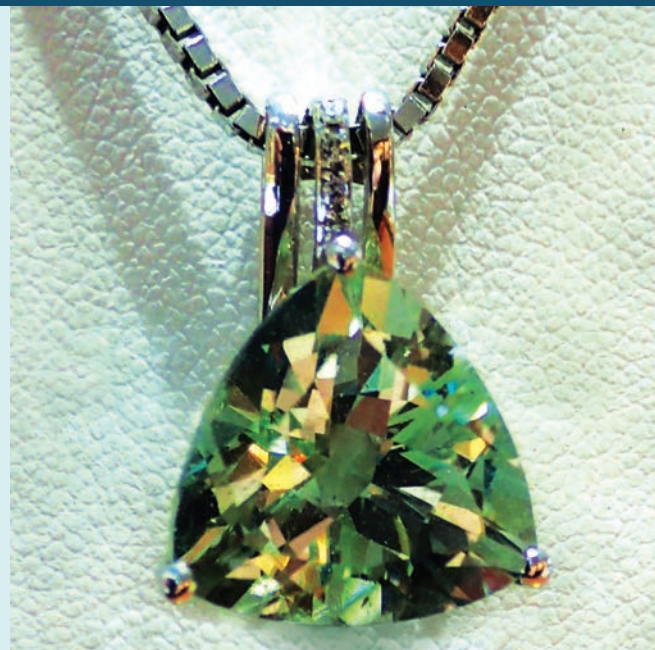
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HIDDEN HISTORIES

Colonial Cannibalism The Starving Time

BY JACK R. JOHNSON



IF YOU THINK THIS WINTER is rough, consider the so called Starving Time of 1609 in Jamestown, Virginia. That year saw one of the worst regional droughts in centuries, which proved catastrophic for the early colonists. Many of the settlers were unused to hard agricultural labor and thus depended on supplies brought to them by subsequent missions or by trade with the Powhatan Indians who had become disenchanted with the newcomers. Rather than trade with them, the Indians besieged the fort at Jamestown and would not let them hunt for whatever scarce food remained. The end result—death by starvation and disease—was predictable, but sometimes it was worse: sometimes they ate each other.

In 1625, George Percy, who had been president of Jamestown during the Starving Time wrote a letter describing the colonists' diet during that terrible winter. "Haveinge fedd upon our horses and other beastes as longe as they Lasted, we weare gladd to make shifte with vermin as doggs Catts, Ratts and myce...as to eat Bootes shoes or any other leather," he wrote. "And now famin beginneinge to Looke gastely and pale in every face, thatt notheinge was Spared to mainteyne Lyfe and to doe those things which seame incredible, as to digge upp deade corpes outt

of graves and to eat them. And some have Licked upp the Bloode which hath fallen from their weake fellowes."

Despite such anecdotal evidence of cannibalism, little hard evidence had been discovered until archaeologists from Preservation Virginia dug up the bones of a 14 year old girl in 2012.

They found the girl in a pit, according to lead archaeologist William Kelso in Smithsonian Magazine, "We found a deposit of refuse that contained butchered horse and dog bones. That was only done in times of extreme hunger. As we excavated, we found human teeth and then a partial human skull," said Kelso.

"The chops to the forehead are very tentative, very incomplete," added Douglas Owsley, the Smithsonian forensic anthropologist who analyzed the bones "Then, the body was turned over, and there were four strikes to the back of the head, one of which was the strongest and split the skull in half. A penetrating wound was then made to the left temple, probably by a single-sided knife, which was used to pry open the head and remove the brain."

Owsley told Smithsonian Magazine that the cut marks on the jaw, face and forehead of the skull, along with those on the shinbone, are telltale signs of cannibalism. "The clear intent was to remove the facial tissue and the brain

for consumption. These people were in dire circumstances. So any flesh that was available would have been used," says Owsley. "The person that was doing this was not experienced and did not know how to butcher an animal. Instead, we see hesitancy, trial, tentativeness and a total lack of experience."

Nicknamed 'Jane', Owsley speculated that the eaten child likely arrived in the colony during 1609 on one of the resupply ships. She was either a maid-servant or the child of a gentleman. The identity of whoever consumed her is entirely unknown, and Owsley guesses there might have been multiple cannibals involved, because the cut marks on her shin indicate a more skilled butcher than whoever dismembered her head.

And she wasn't the only one, apparently. George Percy's letter also describes how, as president of the colony, he tortured and burned alive a man who had confessed to killing, salting and eating his pregnant wife—so the remains of this woman, along with other victims of cannibalism, are still waiting to be found.

A little good news in all of this, though. Apparently, Jane was not killed, but died of natural causes. Settlers were dying all over the place, so really, there was no need.

And you thought that this winter was rough. **NS**

RAINBOW MINUTES

by **BRIAN BURNS** and **JUDD PROCTOR**



Edna St. Vincent Millay's Stamp

ON JULY 10, 1981, the U. S. Postal Service issued an 18-cent commemorative stamp, honoring poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. The first day issue took place in Austerlitz, New York, where Millay's farmstead, Steepletop, is located.

The image of Millay on the stamp, designed by Glenora Case Richards, was

painted on a piece of old ivory and then mounted in a gold frame. Issued as part of the American Poet-Literary Arts Series, it was printed in panes of fifty stamps.

Millay was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923. Openly bisexual, Millay celebrated the bohemian lifestyle she led in Greenwich Village in the early 1920s. Her later works made a big shift, with descriptions of free and cavalier female sexuality.

A Stamp for Margaret Mead

Born in Philadelphia in 1901, Margaret Mead became a leading cultural anthropologist of her time. As curator of ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History, she published the bestseller, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Mead often made controversial comments on women's rights, sexual morality, environmental pollution and world hunger. Her close relationship with fellow anthropologist Ruth Benedict was profound and long lasting.

On May 28, 1998, the U.S. Postal Service issued a 32-cent stamp, commemorating Mead as part of its Celebrate the Century series—in this case the 1920s.

Mead's daughter ended up living in Hancock, New Hampshire, and in July 1999, the post office of that city held a touching ceremony. They presented Mead's daughter, Mary Bateson, and her daughter, Sevanne Martin Kassarian, a portrait based on Mead's stamp.

A Commemorative Stamp for Ruth Benedict

On October 20, 1995 in Virginia Beach, Virginia, the U.S. Postal Service issued a 46-cent Ruth Benedict stamp, as part of the Great Americans series. They went on sale nationwide the next day.

Benedict is regarded as one of the pioneers of cultural anthropology. She met Margaret Mead in 1922, and they became intimate friends bound by an intense intellectual collaboration.

Both were considered the two most influential women anthropologists of their time, with Benedict being an expert in the culture of Japan. Benedict's landmark book, *Patterns of Culture*, sold over a million and a half copies and was printed in fourteen languages.

In 1998, a man pleaded guilty for counterfeiting 9,742 Ruth Benedict stamps, telling the judge that the red and white stamp was easy to copy. **NSJ**

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BOOK REVIEW

The West's Long Enduring Patriarchy

by FRAN WITHROW

IF YOU WANT TO THINK more about just how deeply entrenched male dominance is in our society, I invite you to peruse “Women and Power: A Manifesto.” The premise of this thoughtful read is that the tradition of male authority in Western society goes back to Greek and Roman times.

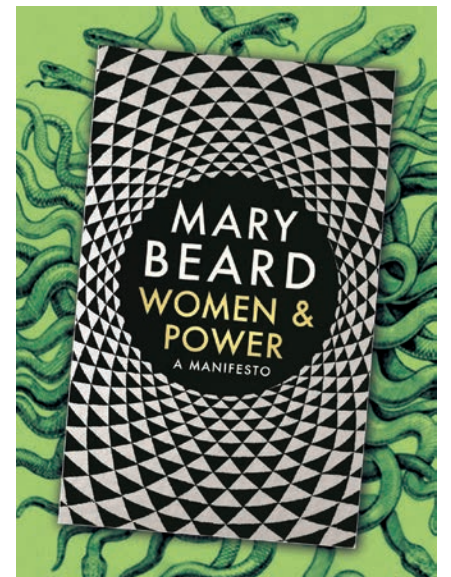
Well, that's depressing.

This slim book that you can devour in an afternoon is a compilation of two essays based on lectures given by author Mary Beard. They read in a relaxed, personal way, and as I turned the pages, I could easily imagine Beard at a podium while I sat in the audience, listening closely.

Beard, who lives in England, draws repeated parallels between the misogyny experienced by women in ancient times and the ways women are silenced in the world today. In “The Odyssey,” for example, Telemachus tells his strong and courageous mother, Penelope, to stop talking, go upstairs and do her needlework. Orating is men's work. Compare that with the recent directive to Senator Elizabeth Warren, who was admonished to “sit down” when she attempted to read a letter written by Coretta Scott King.

Other famous women from the past are also laid out as examples of how women's voices are silenced. From Philomena, who was raped and then had her tongue cut out, to Medusa (who, Beard purports, is a symbol of male mastery), women have a long history of being pushed aside by men. Medusa, whose head was cut off to silence her, is a perfect example of how men treat women who challenge authority. It is no coincidence, says Beard, that Trump supporters superimposed Hillary Clinton's face on Medusa's severed head during last year's presidential campaign.

While women have made slow progress since ancient times, there are still many roadblocks toward gender equality when it comes to obtaining and wielding power. Beard demonstrates how modern women like Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher attempt to bridge the gap with



pantsuits (rather than dresses) and voice lessons (since lower voices are associated with authority). I have often heard women say that their higher voices do not command respect. Yet Beard maintains that this is a societal construct rather than a biological one.

The struggle for power is personal for Beard, who describes her own experiences with gender injustice as well as what she has observed in her country. She discusses the painful radio interview of two Parliamentary candidates (one male and one female) and the responses they received from the public. I can tell you the differences were glaring and discouraging.

Beard also ponders the meaning of the word “power.” Does this need to be changed so women are not excluded? Is the current understanding of power so deeply embedded with male imagery that we must completely dismantle it and start over?

Good questions.

Though she offers no clear answer to the problem of women and power, Beard raises many provocative points. I closed the book with a lot to ponder, and a deep gratitude for all the women who continue to struggle for leverage in a world still largely controlled by men. **NJ**

Women and Power
by Mary Beard
128 pages
W.W. Norton and Co.
\$15.95



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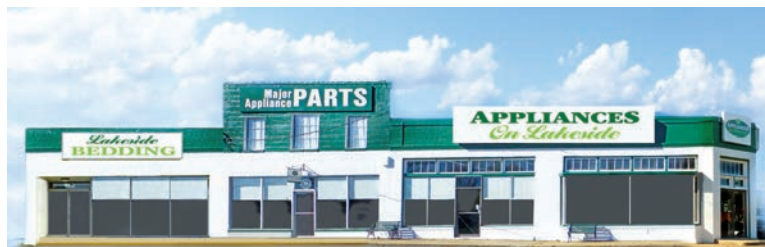


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