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A PORTRAIT OF US

Mary Whyte's new exhibition at the Mennello Museum of American Art in Orlando, Florida, opens this October 16. **BY ROCHELLE BELSITO**

Throughout our lives we are constantly encountering people. They may be close friends or family, or someone we interact with for only a few moments. Beyond the surface, these individuals have their own stories and experiences that make them distinctly unique and relatable at the same time.

Documented in the watercolors of South Carolina-based artist Mary Whyte are the faces of everyday men and women. They are average people going about their daily activities, and who are forever enshrined in colorful, fluid and well-rendered brushstrokes. Many viewers of Whyte's work may not know these subjects by name, but they find a connection—whether through emotions

or blue collar roots.

"It's us—everybody has a story to tell," says Whyte of what draws her to the human form. "I love painting the face, the textures of skin and hair and clothing. I will never run out of subject matter. I know that for sure."

Twenty-three years ago, Whyte and her frame maker husband, Smith Coleman, moved to South Carolina, and it is there she began painting the Gullah women of John's Island. "I met them," she says, "and thought, 'Here's a story to be told.'"

Then, eight years ago, she began painting a series titled *Working South* depicting laborers and vanishing industries. *Working South* began by accident, as Whyte recalls, "...I was doing a

portrait of a bank president, and just while we were doing sketches, I was chatting about a newspaper article about a mill closing. He said, 'If you're going to paint mills, you better work quickly. In five or 10 years they'll be gone.'"

These two major bodies of work are the continued focus of Whyte's paintings. Having begun on a more regional level, Whyte has expanded to depict people from around the entire nation. The individuals are from all walks of life—postmasters, firemen, loggers, tattoo artists, fighters, mill workers, the elderly and more.

"[These are] everyday people in their surroundings without adding any sentimentally or glamour to them," says Whyte. "I am just trying to paint the people and places of our times."

Many of the individuals Whyte paints are not people she knows, but people she has encountered during her many travels and has found "uniquely interesting." Whyte explains, "I ask them if they'll be willing to pose for me. Of course, most of the people—the type of people I like to paint—have never had anyone ask to paint or photograph or sketch them or really have paid much attention to them at all."

When capturing these subjects in watercolor, Whyte uses four main methods to create the composition. "It's a combination of working from life as much as I can, but when you have people involved, you can't be for a long period of time—particularly persons at work; I often rely on photographs and a lot from memory and imagination," describes Whyte. "It's life, photographs, memory and imagination."

Beginning October 16, the Mennello Museum of American Art in Orlando, Florida, will host a new exhibition of Whyte's work. The show, *Mary Whyte: A Portrait of Us*, will display paintings mostly completed in the past four years, with some





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1
Artist Mary Whyte. Photo
by Jack Alterman.

2
Special Delivery,
watercolor on paper,
27¾ x 40¼". Collection
of the artist.

3
Roller, watercolor on
paper, 28¼ x 28¼".
Collection of the artist.



3



4

older pieces on view as well.

In describing the show, Whyte says, "Well, it's a real cross section of people in this exhibition. It really is a portrait of us. When people go to my exhibitions and view my paintings, I know they most likely don't recognize the person in the painting. My hope is they will recognize the emotion of the person in the painting."

Included in the exhibition are works such as *Special Delivery*, which shows a young Alaskan postmaster from a small fishing village of around 300 people; and *Roller* of a Montana logger whom the artist met while on a painting trip with her friend and fellow artist Gretchen Finch. There also are pieces such as *Edger* that depict the more dangerous or technical workings of a job.

Edger, which previously appeared in the artist's *Working South* tour of exhibitions, portrays a lumberyard worker. "He'd worked there most of his life," says Whyte. "That job, like many jobs, struck me as being a dangerous job. The mill manager toured me around the whole place, and he said, 'What do



5

4
Sweet Potatoes,
watercolor on paper,
29 x 40½". Courtesy
Coleman Fine Art.

5
Tattoo, watercolor on
paper, 53 x 40" framed.
Collection of the artist.

6
Glory, watercolor
on paper, 28½ x 20".
Collection of the artist.







8

7
Flurries,
watercolor on
paper, 23¾ x 31".
Collection of the
artist.

8
Edger, watercolor
on paper, 22 x 30".
Private collection.

you want this guy to do?' I said, 'Go sit right under the blade.' They shut down the saw blades...one after the other. I got him to scramble up there, and he didn't blink."

The 2012 painting *Tattoo* is a look at a tattoo artist with some of his tools. "I went in, and [tattoo parlors] are very weird—the lighting, music, the fact that people are having this art put on their body. Sometimes the emblems are things like skulls and dragons," Whyte says. "I positioned him with the light down low to shoot up on him, with the shadow casting upward to add to the feeling I had in the tattoo parlor."

Tattoo, like the rest of the works in the show, is framed with a piece by Coleman. On this particular frame, Coleman replicated some of the tattoos on the man's arms, creating an intricate design along its edges. "The frames are works of art on their own," Whyte says.

Also on view are paintings that connect on a more personal level, such as *Glory*, of a woman from Georgia in her mid-90s. "It really alludes to the end of a person's life," Whyte describes, adding, particularly for a spiritual person, it's the moment where they ascend and pass on into the next life.

These paintings, and the others in *A Portrait of Us*, are just a glimpse at the oeuvre Whyte has created throughout her artistic career. They are expressions of life, emotion and commonalities—they share both an individual's story and a universal story of us. ●

A PORTRAIT OF US

When: October 16, 2015-January 3, 2016

Where: The Mennello Museum of American Art,
900 E. Princeton Street, Orlando, FL 32803

Information: (407) 246-4278, www.mennellomuseum.com