

Dennis McGonagle: Finding Meaning in Everyday Surroundings Los Angeles Painter

I LOVE to make art, I always have. From the time I could first hold a pencil or crayon in my hand, I have considered myself to be an artist. I have been a painter for more than 20 years. Although my main area of concentration is the urban landscape, I also like to paint murals, still life paintings, figures, portraits, abstract and non-representational works.

My art is about contrast. Contrast and color are the most important design elements in my work. For example, I like to contrast hot and cold. I like to show hot, blinding sunlight and contrast it against cool, luminous shadow. I like my paintings to describe great distances. That is one reason why I paint landscapes. I paint images of things that come tumbling out of the picture plane and others that are thousands of miles away.

My art is about manmade forms, patterns and colors existing in the natural world. Machines and plants. Buildings and sunsets. Cement and soil. I love to contrast the darkest darks with the lightest lights. I need to use a full range of color in order to translate what I see and feel and experience in the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional wall or canvas.

My art is about finding meaning in everyday surroundings. Through the process of painting, I can interpret my environment and learn the essence of my subject matter. I can then use the language of painting to communicate real and imagined aspects of my daily life.

I fell in love with painting when I took my first art class at Rio Hondo Community College. I made a lifelong pledge to never let a day go by without doing something to develop my capacity to paint. That was nearly 25 years ago, but I still hold to that commitment. I try to draw or paint or study art every day.

It was easy to be an artist back when I was an art student. Since it was my job to study art, I could focus on it many hours a day.

As I took on the responsibilities of marriage, family, owning a home and paying bills, I found it harder and harder to find time to paint. Whatever job I had, I would try to bring art into it. As a beach maintenance worker, I carried a sketch book and drew the people on the beach. As a factory worker, I would do small paintings of the landscape out the doorway during my lunch break. As a bus driver, I carried my easel and canvas with me and would paint after I dropped off my passengers.

I was not cut out for bus driving. I got lost a lot and it seemed like I was driving night and day, seven days a week, for very little money.

My wife had been practicing Buddhism for about a year when she suggested I begin chanting for what would make me happy. So I chanted to have enough time to paint.

Within a few weeks, I lost my bus driver job and began a new career as an art consultant for elementary school children. This career began as a result of me volunteering to teach art to my son's kindergarten class. I found that I really enjoyed teaching children about art—I was inspired by their creative energy. Soon, the principal hired me to teach every art class in the school. Other schools sent people to observe my lessons, and I started teaching art throughout the entire school district. When things got slow in the first district, I added a second school district to my route.

I was now making more than twice the money I had made as a bus driver and

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working only half the hours. I also noticed that the process of studying and preparing for my art lessons had the effect of adding more dimension to my own paintings.

I now had the freedom to go out into the community and paint every day. I would set up my easel on the sidewalks, in the parks, in the hills, wherever I could find a landscape.

Around that time the local phone book publisher asked me to paint a landscape for the cover of the Whittier, Calif., telephone directory. Thus my painting titled *View From the Hills* was used for the cover of the 1992 Whittier telephone book. Later, it was purchased by the City of Whittier Sister City Committee and presented as a gift to the city of Changshu, China.

I began doing paintings for other cities shortly afterward and have since created paintings for the covers of twenty-two California telephone books. Every year since 1986, I have painted *plein-air* landscapes for the covers of the phone directories for Whittier, Santa Fe Springs, Ontario and Upland.

I began to receive commissions for wall murals as well. I have completed fourteen murals since I began chanting in 1984.

I feel that a mural painter needs to have audience awareness. He or she needs to know the history, culture, hopes and dreams of the people who will be looking at his artwork. A mural needs to fit the community that it exists in. Since a mural is a public message, it must speak a language that its public can understand and appreciate.

In 1989, Whittier College officials had seen me painting around the campus and had noticed publicity about my murals and local art exhibitions. They offered me the opportunity to return to school and earn my bachelor's degree and teaching credential. To help pay for tuition, I was given the student job of campus mural painter.

Last spring I finished work on a painting on the back wall of Village Music in Uptown Whittier titled *Symphony in the Air*, which measures ninety square feet and features portraits of local musicians and music teachers. The Whittier City Council passed an ordinance making it the first officially sanctioned mural in the City of Whittier.

Today I teach a bilingual fifth-grade class in a school that is only a ten-minute walk from where I live. I am also district visual arts mentor. It is my job to travel to different schools and assist with art instruction wherever needed.

At present, I am working on a large painting of a bicycle rider in Turnbill Canyon. I am also developing plans for a California history mural for Lincoln Elementary School, where I work. I am working with a team of students on a new mural for Whittier College and am designing panels for a bus shelter in the City of Brea. In addition, I am preparing for an exhibit of my work in Norwalk this summer. In the evenings and on the weekends, I have the freedom to work on my paintings and sculptures in my own backyard art studio.

It is because of my Buddhist practice that I can accomplish all of these things. By chanting I can live in the moment; whatever I am doing, I can concentrate on it more fully. I can balance the demands and responsibility of my family and career, while staying focused and inspired by my art. If I only have a couple of hours to paint, I chant to have the kind of focus necessary to make a week's worth of progress on my painting.

Every morning I chant to have a wonderful day in the classroom— to be the best teacher I can be; to inspire my students to want to learn. I love being able to make a contribution to my community as an artist, teacher and human being. □