

James McGarrell

Themes and Variations

August 5–October 30, 2005

What I call pictorial invention is nothing but memory, recombined and sprung into life by making colored marks. I occasionally draw from direct observation but I do not paint from it, nor do I use those drawings or photographs as source material in the canvases. I would never attempt an image of any phenomenon I have not experienced, however. Although this may make my paintings works of fictive imagination, they are not fantasy.

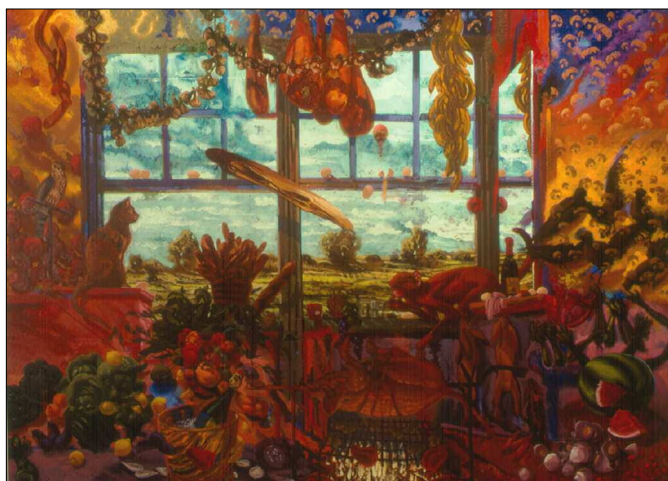
— James McGarrell

James McGarrell had his first solo exhibit at the Frank Perls Gallery half a century ago. Since then, his paintings and prints have been shown in hundreds of exhibitions in America, Europe, and Japan.

While he is an artist with an international reputation, his baroquely elaborate and multi-layered works—saturated with literary references, homages, autobiographical tidbits, formal ploys, and visual conceits—have persistently evaded both formal categorization and the mass audience for art, for they demand more than a modicum of enlightenment and adamantly insist on more than a casual glance.

The viewer is rudderless, for example, without some familiarity with the paintings of Henri Matisse, the novels of Vladimir Nabokov, or the poems of Elizabeth Bishop when faced with McGarrell's *Young and Old* portraits. This point is made abundantly clear by comparing the immediacy of Andy Warhol's iconic *Marilyn* to the visual density and skeins of metaphors in McGarrell's *Grand Artificer, Young and Old (James Joyce)*.

And while many are dazzled simply by the visual extravagance of *The Great Palindrome Still Life* and *The Large Vanitas with Holbein Quotation*, it serves the viewer well to know that the Latin term *vanitas vanitatum* means “vanity of vanities” and the *vanitas* still life is an allegorical reference to the transience of life. Additionally, both of these heavily loaded images can be read as homages to a form of 17th-century Dutch still life painting called *pronk* (literally, a display of ostentatious objects) that flattered the bourgeois Dutch collectors while also serving as a display of the painter's skills. Further, McGarrell's paintings point



The Large Vanitas with Holbein Quotation, 1999, oil on canvas, 61 x 80 in.

back to the origins of the still life tradition in the *xenia*—or “gift of food”—as depicted in the mosaics and frescoes of ancient Rome.

In 1990 McGarrell was given an opportunity to decorate tiles. The secrets of vitrified white clay (porcelain, or *china-ware*), often decorated with rich indigo designs, had been jealously guarded for centuries in Asia, and only after years of trial and error were similar formulas devised in Spain, Portugal, and Holland. McGarrell,

restricting himself to one of the most ancient aspects of porcelain decoration—washes of cobalt blue on tiles, plates, and vases—has turned it into a highly eloquent and personal means of expression.

What he gleaned from the experience of porcelain painting was carried over into his practice as a draftsman and printmaker. *Orbiana Oliveto*, a group of monotypes McGarrell produced in Italy in 2003, is derived from the *Odyssey*. The enigmatic and romantic character of these chiaroscuro wash drawings is greatly enhanced by McGarrell's use of the rich indigo of his tiles. The images are a far cry from the classical reliefs and renderings we typically associate with Homer's epic. In turn, their mood is met perfectly by Rosanna Warren's earthy poems.

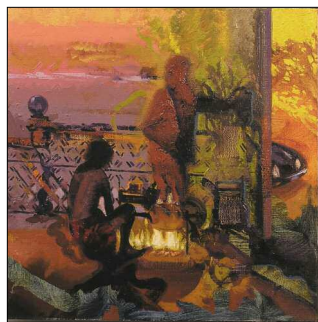
The works in this exhibit provide a concise introduction to the formal, creative, and intellectual character of McGarrell's paintings, graphics, and ceramics, and give a clear indication of the complex, interlocking threads of his oeuvre.

— John Arthur
Guest Curator

BRATTLEBORO MUSEUM & ART CENTER

10 Vernon Street • Brattleboro, VT 05301 • www.brattleboromuseum.org • Open daily except Tuesday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Works in the exhibit. Dimensions are height by width, in inches.



Cookout, 2003, oil on canvas, 16 x 16 in.

The Novelist, Young and Old (Vladimir Nabokov) 1992

oil on canvas, 80 x 60

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

The Grand Artificer, Young and Old (James Joyce) 1993

oil on canvas, 80 x 124

Courtesy of the Jane Haslem Gallery, Washington, DC

The Poet, Young and Old (Elizabeth Bishop) 1993

oil on canvas, 80 x 60

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

The Artist, Young and Old (Henri Matisse) 1993

oil on canvas, 80 x 60

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

The Great Palindrome Still Life 1998

oil on canvas, 61 x 164

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

The Large Vanitas with Holbein Quotation 1999

oil on canvas, 61 x 80

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

Roast Chickens and Pumpkin Squash 1997

oil on canvas, 22 x 24

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

Dressed Trout and Celery Root 1997

oil on canvas, 22 x 24

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

Eggplants and Endive 1998

oil on canvas, 22 x 24

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

Fennel and Porchetta 1998

oil on canvas, 22 x 24

Courtesy of the George Adams Gallery, New York City

Six paintings

oil on canvas, 16 x 16 each

Courtesy of the artist

Bear Cage 2003

Cookout 2003

Hay Barn 2003

Island 2003

Reflection 2003

Waves 2003

24 Porcelain Tiles and Plates

Courtesy of the artist

Dancers and Pig, 1990, 6 x 6

Dancers under a Skylight, 1990, 6 x 6

Beach Frolic, 1991, 6 x 6

Flying Carpet, 1991, 6 x 6

Beach Kids, 1999, 11 ¼ x 11 ¼

Drawing in the Ceramic Studio, 1999, 11 x 11

Pregnant Bather and Infant, 1999, 6 x 6

Two in a Tub, 1999, 6 x 6

Dog Trainer, 1999, 8 ¾ x 8 ¾

Island, 2000, 8 ¼ diameter

Beachfront Frolic, 2000, 9 ¾ diameter

Beachfront, 2001, 6 x 6

Tarmac, 2001, 6 x 6

Bathers, 2002, 12 x 12

Haystack, 2002, 12 x 12

Sonata, 2002, 12 x 12

Dancing Pair & Pets, 2003, 14 x 14

Cottonwoods, 2004, 12 x 12

Crackles, 2004, 12 x 12

Cookout, 2004, 14 x 14

Movies, 2004, 8 x 8

Piano Dancer, 2004, 8 x 8

Stable, 2004, 8 x 8

White Cow, 2004, 8 x 8



Crackles, 2004, porcelain tile, 12 x 12 in.

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10 Vernon Street
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www.brattleboromuseum.org

Museum Hours and Accessibility

Open daily except Tuesdays
11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
The Museum is wheelchair accessible.

An ASL interpreter for the hearing impaired will be provided if requested two weeks in advance of tours or programs.

Museum Admission and Parking

BMAC members free
Adults \$4
Seniors \$3
Students \$2
Children under 6 free

Parking is available in front of the Museum. Additional nearby parking is available at the Marlboro College Technology Center lot on Vernon Street.

Museum Shop

Open during regular Museum hours, the Museum Shop features an eclectic assortment of books, gifts, and note cards from local artists.

Group Tours

Docent-led tours of the Museum for groups are available by appointment. Call the Museum for information.

Orbiana Oliveto, a suite of 19 drawings, each 22 x 30 inches, made and printed in the monotype medium on the intaglio press of the Ligurian Study Center for the Arts and Humanities at Bogliasco, Italy, in March and April of 2003; with 19 short prose poems written to accompany them by the distinguished poet Rosanna Warren.

Courtesy of the artist

Penelope's Dream, 2003, monotype drawing, 22 x 30 in.



- Frontispiece
- Athena's Visit
- Nestor's Heifer
- Penelope's Dream
- Nausikaa's Linens
- Eurymedousa's Fire
- Wine of Maron
- Kirke's Swine
- Antikleia's Shade
- Oxen of Helios

- Eumaios' Hospitality
- Helen's Divination
- Telemakhos' Bath
- Penelope's Loom
- Eurykleia's Recognition
- Slaying of the Suitors
- Lynching of the House Maidens
- Laertes' Supper
- Endpiece