



Bethlehem artist Kate Worm discusses one of her many Alexander County waterscapes

The Art of Being Kate Worm

I ask artist Kate Worm how she came to live in Alexander County. "I'm originally from Texas, but I've moved around," she replies as we sip our hot coffee around the dining room table in her cozy Bethlehem home. "We moved down from New York State 37 years ago, into the Hickory area. My husband, John, is a social worker and he took a job with mental health. And I went to work in special education. So, after the children were raised—at that time I was a still life painter—we had a small home in Hickory and we needed a bigger place with a studio. Alexander County is just beautiful, so we found this place in Bethlehem. But then I started feeling a bit isolated, so eight or nine years ago, I took a studio in downtown Hickory on the square. I still have that studio."

How did you begin doing art in the first place? I ask. "I was 30 when I had my first child," Kate recalls. "When he was about four, I could see that he had a lot of talent for drawing, and I thought 'I wonder where he gets that?' About that same time a book came out called 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.' I picked it up. She had these exercises that cut off the critical mind and allow you spatially to relate to your objects. So, I thought, 'My gosh! I can draw! I can draw quite well!' I showed my work to a friend I worked with at Mental Health and she said I should take lessons. So, I went to this fellow named Jim Kerr, and I said 'I want you to help me with my drawing.' He said 'I think we'll have you paint instead.' I painted the old mill going north on the Parkway. And I did not sleep that night! I was so excited! Isn't that something?! It was weird. My instructor said 'You ought to show your work to a gallery in Winston-Salem.' So, I did, and they agreed to show it and they sold it well. But I really didn't know much about painting, I just did it. And I thought 'If I'm going to sell artwork, I'm really going to need more of a foundation.' I went to school one night a week for eight semesters at UNC-G with the same instructor and the same class, 'Graduate Drawing and Painting.' And that was working with a figure. It broadened my base and my knowledge."

Kate continues. "I resigned from my job at mental health in 1981. Back when I was just learning to draw all the furniture places were looking for illustrators at the time and I thought 'Hmm, I can do that.' So, I put together a portfolio of actually rather poor drawings; however, the price was good, and I got work. Throughout the '80s I did writing and illustration for the furniture industry. Throughout this time, I was also painting for my own pleasure, mostly 'plein air,' that means 'fresh air.' I painted from set up still lifes. I don't do much work from photographs."

"Around 1990 we went into somewhat of a recession and furniture stopped advertising with illustrations as much as they had been. And when that came back, it seemed like it had all just jumped to computer work. That's the way it seemed to me. And so I thought, 'I either need to get savvy technically, or I think I'll go fine arts.' So I decided to just concentrate on painting."

"But, I also did work as an educator. I worked for around 15 years with a group of painters in Morganton that are intellectually disabled, but gifted in different ways. I worked twice a month with three of those painters. I wasn't teaching them because they were already where they wanted to be, but I helped them with structuring their time, and making sure they had their materials. I did encourage the use of different size brushes and some of that, but I didn't teach really. They were very gifted. They have shown their work all over the world, and have made big names for themselves. They're wonderful."

"I also taught figure drawing and painting at the Hickory

People & Culture
by Layne Hendrickson



A beautiful piece by Kate Worm - Hydrangea, Oil on Canvas.

Museum of Art. About 12 years ago, the director hired me on as staff as an adult educator. That was a part time job, I still was painting. Then I moved into being curator of the permanent collection. That was really fun, planning exhibitions and all that stuff. I eventually resigned from the staff a couple of years ago, but I still teach there. I teach figure drawing and painting. I also teach around in different places as well. I have a workshop in Southport, which is over by Wilmington, coming up in six weeks."

"I'm less attached to the outcome of this work. It's more about the doing of it. And hoping that that process enlivens our world, our consciousness. Just the being there and noting the scene."
—Kate Worm

What have you been doing recently? I enquire. "I have the studio downtown and that's where I do the oil on canvas that are abstract landscapes and some still life. When I stopped working as a staff person at the art museum, I thought 'I'm going to get outside as much as I can.' I love the outdoors. I've been working out on location with watercolor and gouache on pastel paper. I've got about 70 of these done. Mostly they are wooded interiors, not so much the vista. So I've been painting in Riverbend Park. The trails there are very beautiful. They go up and down ravines and by little creeks and things. Just a beautiful park. And I've been working down in Lincolnton on the south fork of the Catawba River."

"Bud Caywood asked me if I wanted a show at the Bethlehem Library. He arranged for me to have a show this coming August. I decided to paint only Alexander County and let it be a tribute to the beauty in this county. So now I've been focusing on Alexander County rather than the entire region. Now I'm not exactly sure if we'll end up with that, or a more regional watercolor thing. But we might do what I would call 'An Alexander County Sketch Book.' And after they are done showing here at the Bethlehem library, I would like to put them somewhere else. I don't know where, maybe the Taylorsville Library. But that's my idea, a tribute to this county."

Tell me a bit about your creative process. I prompt. "It depends on whether I'm going to work outside or in my studio. The paintings in the studio are built up over weeks because I have to wait for the oil paint to dry. And those usually start with an idea,



Hugging Knees, watercolor by Kate Worm.

or a motif, say 'root system on a creek' possibly. And that might be the idea. But the painting itself is rather abstract with hints of landscape elements. And honestly, I'm not there yet. I'm just not. That's the hardest thing. That work is harder than the outdoor work."

"The outdoor work is a breeze. It's just fun. If you just stand in one place, any place, you begin to see composition and beauty. You just do. So my outdoor works are for the most part simple things. I'm working against time, against the changing light and so they're done quickly. Some of them are okay, some of them are good, some of them are less good. You know it's just the way it goes. But there's not a lot tied up with the outcome. I'm not putting them up on the market. For one thing, they would have to be put under glass and the dealers don't want that. They don't like the reflections and they are hard to store. So they would much rather have oil or acrylic paintings for the most part. So this is not a 'for sale' thing. I'm just doing my thing. 'I fiddled my life away in paint today.' That's what I do. I'm less attached to the outcome of this work. It's more about the doing of it. And hoping that that process enlivens our world, our consciousness. Just the being there and noting the scene."

And where would you like to see yourself four or five years from now? I ask. "I'd like to develop more skill in abstract art. And maybe I'll even come back to realism somehow. Right now, I'm kind of on the border between the two and it's uncomfortable. So I'm leaning more toward the abstraction, but after doing all this work with the waterscapes, I'm thinking maybe I'll lean a little bit more this way. Maybe it's wishful thinking, but maybe if I spend enough time outdoors doing all this painting, there's going to be a rearrangement inside for the larger oil paintings in my studio. I'm open. It's a search."

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