



RED BARN  
pastel  
40" x 60"

## BOBBIE MCKIBBIN: DRAWN WEST

*Landscape artist records the world with honesty*

By Charles Finn



In Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's visually stunning 1990 film "Dreams," there is a scene where a young museum goer suddenly finds himself within the Van Gogh paintings at

which he is looking, shrunken in size, stumbling through the Dutch artist's most famous creations. With confused anxiety the contemporary figure stumbles down a garden path, jogs across "The Drawbridge at Arles," and ends up in "The Crows," staring at the rotund and yellow globe of the sun. It is a wonderful few minutes of film, dreamlike as the director

intends it to be, and haunting.

It is 11 a.m. in the Bitterroot Valley and I have just experienced something of the same sort. Driving on North Kootenai Creek Road in Stevensville, Mont., I'm on my way to visit artist Bobbie McKibbin and, like the figure in the movie, I feel as if I have just passed over (and through) one of her pastel drawings. On my left is the yellow and black hazard sign along with the nettles and knapweed I was looking at just last night, and with a sense of déjà vu, I rattle down the gravel road until at the far end (the diminishing point in the drawing) I turn right, crossing where I intuit the wood frame should be. In a cloud of dust I park outside McKibbin's studio, step out of my truck and brush down my jeans.

Part of my confusion comes from the fact that McKibbin often draws this stretch of road, and when she does she draws it as it is, without enhancement, without cheap pity or sentimentality—but with omnipresent hope. Thus the attractiveness of her drawings (all of them) resides in the faithful rendering of the landscapes they depict; landscapes indifferent to human needs, complicated and beautiful in their own right. There is also a photographic quality to McKibbin's work. (I was completely fooled the first time I walked into the Missoula Art Museum to see her show, Drawn West, thinking I was approaching a series of enlarged photographs.) But that is the skill, the technique she has mastered, her "art" coming from the communication between the different drawings and their communication with her. At some point during their making, McKibbin says each drawing begins talking to her, and then to each other.

McKibbin has shoulder length red hair, snazzy designer glasses, and, at least today, is wearing orange flip-flops. Inviting me into her studio, we share fresh strawberries from her garden, after which one of the first things she has me do is hold a piece of chalk. McKibbin relishes the senses, all of them, not just sight. "Don't you just love the feel of it," she says, "the weight."

I lie and say that I do, still partially stunned by the kaleidoscope of color of the easily 600 other pieces of chalk and chalk stubs strewn across the table in front of me, not to mention god knows how many more in the black metal Craftsman's tool cabinet she keeps opening and closing behind her as she looks for just the right shade of blue. The room itself measures 19-by-37 feet with a 10-foot, 3-inch ceiling, all of it white—the walls, the ceiling, the floor—the color of writer's block, I think. There are two large windows facing



BITTERROOT FOG #2  
pastel  
22" x 30"



FIELDS #2  
pastel  
32" x 64"

north, one east, row upon row of florescent lights and track lighting shining down from above. In the northeast corner is a vintage Spirit of '76 pinball machine, functional, but which I have not yet worked up the nerve to ask about. A 3-foot-tall Bozo the Clown inflatable punching bag also grins and tugs at my curiosity from afar, but again I resist.

Finding the hue she wants, McKibbin advances to her easel and chalks in a bit of sky. She works from a photograph she holds in her right hand, drawing with her left. McKibbin draws exclusively from photos she takes, hundreds of them, thousands: snapshots of barns and gardens, dirt roads and hay fields, vistas from across the West and Midwest, and from her front and back yards. She travels three to four times a year, by car, back and forth between Iowa where she teaches painting at Grinnell College and the Bitterroot Valley. The trip takes two days, but it is here, inside her studio, where she puts on the real miles.

"Drawing is a physical process," McKibbin tells me, as indeed it is. Flip-flops clicking eponymously, her feet slightly played, she walks back and forth to her easel on an 8-foot

stretch of rubber mat—long strides on the way there, exuding confidence; shorter, more careful ones on the return journey, full of contemplation. McKibbin is tall, over 6 feet, and when she stops to talk she sways side to side, as if the internal combustion of creativity is always looking for an avenue out. Seated and looking up at her, it is like watching a tree sway in the wind, or the mast of a ship circling on the high seas.

For 30 years McKibbin has been a professor at Grinnell College, first teaching printmaking and now painting. It was in the summer of 1977, however, while still teaching printmaking, that she tossed a few packages of pastels in a black doctor's bag "on a whim" and with her partner set out for California in their pickup. Then, for the rest of the summer the vacationing professor sat in the bed of that pickup and (by her own admission) pretended to be Monet.

"That was a stretch. A *really* big stretch," she admits, "but it beat the hell out of printmaking."

Since then McKibbin has been called "possibly the best landscape painter working in the Midwest today," and her work hangs in over 50 corporate collections and 10 museums,

including the Brunnier Art Museum and National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. When she retires to the Bitterroot Valley, she will only build on that reputation, and yet McKibbin tells me there is a notion in the art world that, "To be a real artist you have to paint—watercolor, oil on canvas, it doesn't matter—the thing is to hold a brush in your hand." Still drawing and talking, she balances this idea with the happy concurrence that as you grow older you learn not to care what other people think.

"They may be right," she says, "they may be wrong. It doesn't matter. What matters is to keep doing what you love to do."

McKibbin squeezes her eyesight and advances again, doing what she loves. While still a student in graduate school she found out that she had a partially detached retina in her right eye, and also the same condition in the left, but that that one had healed itself. She had the right eye operated on and after being purblind for a year she remembers returning to her art with the overwhelming thought, "All of a sudden I wanted to celebrate the fact that I could see and



BLEEDING HEARTS  
pastel  
22" x 30"



GREEN GATE  
pastel  
30" x 40"



BADLANDS  
pastel  
20" x 30"

that I wanted to record.”

McKibbin records faithfully, truthfully, proudly. John Canaday, former art critic for the *New York Times* and author of “Mainstreams of Modern Art” called her work, “a cross between Sargent’s fluency with the brush and Hopper’s sensitivity to his subjects.”

In this vein, the brooding gray of a rainstorm is not dark, but honest—one more day, one more hour, one more moment outside and alive on a varied and vulnerable planet.

Canaday also went on to say, “Among the numerous artists who have recently turned to representations of the American scene, McKibbin impresses me as exceptionally skillful technically, which in itself means little, and exceptionally sensitive to the kind of interpretative values in subject matter that make the difference between skillful rendition and significant art. McKibbin finds in the most commonplace views of daily American life a native poetry

that is all the more effective for their subtly controlled understatement.”

Attempting to draw, to “record” a landscape is to attempt the meeting between two impossible scales of time: eternity and the fleeting, ungraspable present, both of which are what the landscape continually offer us. It is one of the beguiling paradoxes of nature, as well as what the very best landscape artists are able to portray. In each of McKibbin’s landscapes there is exactly such a moment of time—steam rising off a hot pool in Yellowstone, a conglomeration of clouds above a ridge, the gray veil of a rainstorm touching the Bitterroots—each rendered until McKibbin, the artist, has disappeared, and only the subject remains. In her Midwest houses, or in her Montana barns leaning into the sunshine, the fleeting nature of each moment is tangible; and then one sees, as if behind it all, the impossible swab of forever. BSJ