



## A PERSONAL REVIEW OF ARTIST BOBBIE MCKIBBIN

By Charles Finn



**In *The Shape of a Pocket* (2003), art critic and novelist John Berger says, “The impulse to paint comes neither from observation nor from the soul (which is probably blind) but from an encounter: the encounter between painter and model—even if the model is a mountain or a shelf of empty medicine bottles.”**



This afternoon, I’m standing in the studio of Bitterroot artist Bobbie McKibbin, recently retired from 30 years of teaching art at Grinnell College in Iowa. She is showing me the beginnings of a new set of pastel drawings and telling me that at some point during the process each drawing begins speaking to her, and then they speak to each other. Echoing Berger, she says, “There has to be something, some dialogue, and some meaningful connection with the subject—or why do it, frankly. You’re doing this wonderful sort of dance, this collaboration with the subject, and I think there has to be respect and deference to that subject... Those are the things I try to honor.”

“I’m not in the business of trying to make ordinary art,” she adds.

McKibbin is tall, over six feet, with shoulder-length red hair and snazzy designer glasses. Looking at her drawings feels like catching nature off guard. In McKibbin’s work, a barn will lean into the sunshine as

if supported by it. Steam rises off a hot pool in Yellowstone to dissolve into the ether. The Bitterroots accept a light veil of rain. Even if you have never visited one of the landscapes McKibbin draws, you intuitively know they have been rendered faithfully with what can only be described as love.

And therein lies the refreshing nature of her work. You do not need to search her drawings for hidden meaning. There is no gospel to learn, no religiosity emanating from her hay bales, no small or large gods hidden in her mountains like wild goats. Her landscapes are not meant to be something or represent something. They are simply meant to be. It is why they work so effectively—more effectively than even the snapshots she takes and works from. Her snapshots capture and freeze the landscape into a single moment. In her drawings, McKibbin reinserts the element of time, deftly hiding it beneath each mark. Thus, her drawings are not static. Instead, eternity infuses each one. McKibbin,

if she does anything at all, takes you by the hand and has you sit down in a field. Then she leaves you there, alone, with everything in the world to gain.

McKibbin's drawings are obviously beautiful—partly because of the subject matter, but more importantly for the way they are put down. She does not jazz up the color of a wheat field or the press of light against a forest wall. Although she says she doesn't have a problem with people taking liberties and abstracting—she points to Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe—what is important for her is, again, that the “integrity and deference [for the subject matter] come through.”

McKibbin has been called “possibly the best landscape painter in the Midwest.” Her work hangs in more than 50 corporate collections and 10 museums, including the Des Moines Art Center, Brunnier Art Museum, and National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution.

McKibbin will acknowledge that beauty can be a trap. Artists fall into it all the time. But somehow she manages to sidestep this trap, all while seeming to stand hip deep in it. Like the poet who wakes us up to an idea we've had and known all along—“Yes! That's what it's like to eat a strawberry!”—McKibbin does the same thing with paper and chalk. The scenes McKibbin chooses to draw are beautiful because they are so ordinary, and there is a natural poetry to her compositions. It is like when we pass by the same barren field every day and hardly notice it. But the subconscious notices—it can't help it. Beauty is addictive. Like the strawberry on the tongue that we couldn't put into words, McKibbin is able to draw that field so we

see it. And that is the definition of art.

“The real world, the landscape, the world that we live in,” says McKibbin, “to my eyes is so magnificent, so varied, and so



rich that it's just like Joe Friday—‘Just the facts, ma'am.’ And I think it's enough of a task to pull that off well, and the artist I point to is John Singer Sargent. He was criticized mightily for just being an eye, just recording, not doing enough.”

This idea of recording is fundamental to McKibbin. Early in her career, she discovered that she had a detached retina in her right eye. She also discovered she had the same condition in her left eye, but it had healed itself. After an operation to correct the situation in her right eye and subsequently being purblind for a year, McKibbin put aside the abstract paintings

she'd been working on—feeling that “they weren't rooted, they weren't grounded anywhere”—and turned to realism. Her brush with blindness made her see the world in a new way. “All of a sudden, I wanted to celebrate the fact that I could see and that I wanted to record,” she says.

Looking at McKibbin's pastels, it's obvious that she records with a stripped sense of respect for her subjects—be it a dirt road, fallow field, the ethereal banks of fog, or the Montana mountain ranges she draws. The scenes themselves are often grand but never grandiose, and the honesty with which she draws is revealing. Her artistry ultimately comes from the fact that in McKibbin's drawings you see none of McKibbin. What you see are the individual lives of the flowers struggling in their own exquisite existence.

Were it somebody else, I'd be inclined to say that much of what McKibbin speaks about smacks of artspeak and the hyperbole of an artist's statement. After all, wouldn't we all like to believe that our subjects commune with us? But how could McKibbin achieve such results without some sort of communion? While other artists are busy employing landscapes—putting words in their mouths, speaking through them to communicate some grand idea—McKibbin lets the landscapes speak for themselves, and, as is always the case, they have nothing to say...which is the greatest poetry we know. ♦

