

The brilliant blues in Mary VanLandingham's "As I'm Leaving," conjure up a trip with her sister over the Chesapeake Bay bridge. MARY VANLANDINGHAM

FROM camera TO canvas

ARTIST TAKES EMOTIONAL JOURNEY IN 'RECOLLECTION'

Amanda Sieradzki Special to Tallahassee Democrat | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Oil painter Mary VanLandingham's muse is found when her camera, her car and a winding dirt road all come together. She hunts for picturesque scenes awash in warm morning sunbeams or cool glimmering twilight. Her drives to find inspiration first began when VanLandingham was a commuter BFA art student at Valdosta State University. ● Now, she and her father have made these trips a special outings. Every few weeks they plan day and weekend trips to find new coastal and rural areas to photograph. VanLandingham will snap anywhere from 700-800 photographs to use as source material for her oil paintings.

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If you go

What: Recollection

When: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, through Aug. 28

Where: Colquitt County Arts Center, Vereen Gallery 401 7th Ave S.W. Moultrie, GA

Cost: Admission free by appointment, masks required

Contact: To make a reservation, please call 229-985-1922. To visit virtually please go to <https://colquittcountyarts.com/digital-gallery-mary-vanlandingham/>.

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Her piece, “Mornings with Dad,” came from a photograph taken on their first road trip to Jekyll Island’s Driftwood Beach. She recalls her father getting misty-eyed when she first shared it with him.

“That was a special memory because it was the start of this tradition we created,” says VanLandingham.

Her exhibition “Recollection” at the Colquitt County Arts Center displays these memories both in the Vereen Gallery and virtually. Attendees can make an appointment to see them in person, or view them online through August 28.

“I almost always paint my own photographs,” she adds. “There’s an emotional connection and excitement because you can recall how you felt when you took that picture, and that’s a lot of what drives me to paint it.”

VanLandingham was born and raised in South Georgia and has had exhibitions across the country. While art was always her passion, it was not a direct route to her current life working as a part-time artist, part-time librarian. In high school she leaned more towards abstract works, and would throw paint at the canvas. She failed advanced placement art in her junior year before passing the class her senior year.

In college, she changed her major five times from undeclared to theater to psychology to business to biology, before taking a walk over to the campus’ fine arts building. She credits a little bit of chance and fate for placing art classes back in her path. Once she found oils, everything clicked.

“I love telling high school students [my journey] because it’s a bit more reassuring that you don’t have to be in this place right off the bat,” says VanLandingham, who has taught demonstrations and lessons at various schools. “Any kind of success I’ve had over the years is because I’ve had a lot of support and people behind me. Anything I’ve done, I’ve never done it alone.”

Her greatest mentor continues to be South Georgia artist Steven S. Walker. VanLandingham completed an internship with Walker as a student assistant. She says Walker imparted many tricks of the trade—from painting techniques to how to be a self-sufficient artist, as well as create a portfolio, apply for shows, and make connections in the community.

VanLandingham used her time in his studio to find her artistic voice. She admired Impressionist painters like Claude Monet and would try her hand at more expressive pieces. Her inclination for meticulousness would soon take over however, and she would go past the point of “suggestion” with her brush and start refining small details. Thus, she cemented her style as a painter grounded in realism.

“When I start to crave those finer details I can’t get with a natural landscape, I branch out into more interior-related scenes,” says VanLandingham. “I want those clean, crisp lines and will take pictures of little cafes or interesting architecture. It’s things you see in everyday life that you don’t notice until you start looking for it.”

VanLandingham typically takes photographs with a



Mary VanLandingham, who has an exhibit in Moultrie, works on a painting. MARY VANLANDINGHAM.

faster exposure to capture the true range of colors in the sky. A painting may take anywhere from six to 30 hours to complete, which she likens to either being a smooth process sans hiccups or a fight to the death. She has 20 works in progress going at any given time, and jokes that there is a special “corner of shame” in her studio for paintings that need serious revival or will be sanded down to a clean slate.

She says her process is one of trial and error and will scroll through online videos to gain new skills and approaches to the canvas. VanLandingham delights in learning from international painters she wouldn’t normally have access to any other way. Despite the hours committed to refinement, her work in the end is justified when she is able to share her pieces with someone else. Especially, when her parents get into the studio to give encouragement and feedback.

“When I finally finish them and I get them to that point where I’m happy with it, it’s the best feeling,” says VanLandingham. “Then when you show it to people and they fall in love with it and talk about what it reminds them of, it reminds me of why I struggled with it for so long.”

Each painting in “Recollection” contains a specific memory for VanLandingham. The brilliant blues in “As I’m Leaving,” conjure up a trip with her sister over the Chesapeake Bay bridge. One of her favorites, “The Revival,” takes her right back to stumbling upon a horse farm with her father in Winchester, Virginia. VanLandingham hopes each work will encourage viewers to take a deep breath, and perhaps even be transported themselves to a place they’re reminded of or that they long to travel to again.

“When I get stressed or overwhelmed these are the scenes that make me feel small again when my problems feel huge,” says VanLandingham. “I want something that allows people to take a step back and look at something simple, that is completely pure in its nature, and that can make them feel good because that’s what it makes me feel when I paint it.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).