

Artist beams warmth for Tallahassee Proud

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

“Tallahassee has a warmth that makes you feel at home,” says painter Janice “Ecinja” McCaskill.

Her work, “Meandering Through the Plaza,” speaks to this exact feeling and is part of the Tallahassee Proud exhibition. In partnership with the City of Tallahassee’s Art in Public Places Program, COCA has designed a special juried, multi-media fine art exhibition showcasing 41 artists’ civic pride. The exhibit opening is from 6-7:30 p.m. on March 4 at City Hall Gallery and will stay on display through April 13.

McCaskill says inspiration for her painting came after a lunch with friends

as she walked through Kleman Plaza for the very first time. It was early spring, and McCaskill was fascinated by the shadows filtering through the trees’ leaves, so she snapped a few photographs to use as source material.

“There’s a warmth there, it’s a space you want to be in,” says McCaskill, who painted a “character” meandering through the scene. “I am hoping if people look at this piece they will be able to visualize this wonderful energy of walking through and slowing down in life, maybe taking time to sit a while and read a book.”

McCaskill comes from a family of storytellers, which has shaped her process of character building and making worlds spring to life on canvas. She takes her

sketchbook everywhere, finding stories in everything from someone sitting at a bus stop or a young mother pushing a stroller down the street. Sometimes these characters come from childhood stories, sometimes they emerge from her mind alone.

“One of my family members used to talk about an aunt who was sick and had leaves on her forehead to pull the fever out,” says McCaskill. “I take those visuals when they tell me these stories and I use my experience to create on canvas.”

McCaskill wasn’t always a full-time artist. When she worked as a therapist, she would stop to admire the paintings that hung on the walls of the hospital.

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Janice “Ecinja” McCaskill has work in the Tallahassee Proud exhibit.

JANICE “ECINJA” MCCASKILL.

McCaskill

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Her eyes often settled on a Japanese landscape that she later learned was created by one of the volunteers.

This volunteer stopped her one day to ask if she had ever considered taking up painting herself. When McCaskill admitted she was curious but not an artist, the woman appeared the following Monday with a brown bag full of oil paints, turpentine, canvases, brushes and instructional books. McCaskill's first painting was of a rose, which she brought in to show the volunteer, who in turn encouraged her to continue painting.

"She pulled the talent out of me," says McCaskill. "I still have the rose and when I look at it, I get a tear in my eye because I tried to find her again but wasn't able to. I'd love to thank her for giving me such a wonderful outlet."

McCaskill was set on a new path, her canvases filling every nook and cranny of her home until she decided to attend the University of South Florida's art program. She learned quickly how to paint with acrylics and increased her knowledge of history's master painters. She says her favorite mentor was professor and professional artist Theo Wujcik, who gave her the affirmation she needed to pursue her own career. She vividly recalls him standing behind her one day in class watching her paint a woman in a field.

"He kept walking back and looking at it until he finally told me to hurry up and finish her hand," says McCaskill. "As soon as I finished the tip of the finger, he grabbed it off my easel and took it to the art trophy case and placed it inside."

McCaskill wakes up early in the morning when the light is brightest and paints quickly once she has a story in mind. She sketches and takes notes in a separate notebook, then gets to work on her canvas. McCaskill says she uses spontaneity with her paint and creates a building process that is evident in the visible layers of paint.

At first she was shy about sharing her work in the community, but an art exhibition in Miami for the New York Art and Film Festival became a pivotal moment in her career. For that show she entered a piece titled, "Cast Out Your Net."

The piece was inspired by a trip to Apalachicola where she had photographed a fisherman tossing out a net into the bay at sunset. When she walked into the festival and saw a first place ribbon hung on her work, she was shocked and was spurred onward to enter other juried shows.

There is a richness in the blues, oranges, reds and greens that run through her work, and she considers herself a "colorist" as well as a storyteller. McCaskill enjoys mixing paints to create new colors and prefers to use lavender shades for shadows so as to not drain a picture of lightness or life.

"What I find to be most rewarding is taking just a blank canvas and building on the color and pushing colors around," says McCaskill. "It's a wonderful feeling. I call it the joy of art to be able to take a blank surface and create something visual. I try to engage my viewer to feel that and become part of that piece and that story."

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).



Janice "Ecinja" McCaskill's "Meandering Through the Plaza," is part of the Tallahassee Proud exhibition opening March 4. JANICE "ECINJA" MCCASKILL.

If you go

What: Tallahassee Proud

When: Opening Reception 6-7:30 p.m. March 4, exhibition open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday through April 13

Where: City Hall Art Gallery, 300 South Adams St.

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit www.tallahasseearts.org.

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