

Pam Rosenblatt

**Chelsea's Artist Martha McCollough: Thinking Outside of her World**



**T**he day is Sunday, September 23, 2012. It's 11 a.m. And the weather is clear and crisp with a bright sun shining down upon the top of a hill in Chelsea, Massachusetts. WHLR arts editor Pam Rosenblatt rings the doorbell to the home of artist Martha McCollough, who soon opens the front door and lets Pam into her artistic living space.

*The following article results from this 43 minute interview, 43 minutes filled with chatter, artwork discussions, and photographing. Here it is!*

**C**helsea's Martha McCollough wanted to be an artist since the age of eight years. She's not certain why but, as a young girl, she thought it would be "interesting to do!" She didn't care if she had the talent for it. She simply knew that painting was what she wanted to do with her life.

And it is lucky McCollough decided to become that artist she dreamed of as a child, for

her paintings are eye-catching, intriguing, and definitely art pieces not soon to be forgotten.



The simple yet often complex in metaphoric artworks are "cartoonish", as she calls them, and leave visual and intellectual impressions on the viewer.

Her childhood artworks were drawings of horses and ballerinas. "And all that girly stuff," she joked, sitting in a chair in her den.

McCollough said that her first pictures were created with ballpoint pen on notebooks when she should have been concentrating on schoolwork.

WHLR arts editor Pam Rosenblatt, who was seated on the couch,

smiled and listened intently with a pen and notebook in hand as a digital recorder, placed on a nearby coffee table, taped the McCollough interview.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, McCollough attended the University of Michigan and moved to New York City a couple of years after gradua-

tion. After receiving a Master's degree from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, McCollough obtained a fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. In the 1980s, she moved to Boston and has lived in the Metro Boston area ever since.

McCollough's work has consistent themes of catastrophes and paranoia. Her pieces have developed from painting images of cats, boats, and water scenes to current images of people wearing masks, detectives, spies, and government spying.



"I'm not really interested in looking at something and saying, 'This is what it looks like to me. And I'm looking at this and I feel this now kind of painting – that's really interesting. And I like it,'" she said.

McCollough finds that the best way to "express [her subject] is through a simplified line.

Even if it's a complex image," she explains, "it's often built off very simple pieces. And for me, they're more expressive. They're closer to what I am thinking and want to say."

All of her artwork is done by freehand. "It's all freehand ... It's freehand in the sense I'm not working off a grid. I often use tape in order to delineate a shape that I want to paint. If I want to get very hard edges, I like a mixture of very hard, clean edges and more brushy, handmade looking lines," she said.



In the past, McCollough painted with enamel on masonite. "Enamel is an oil-based paint. The [brand] I used is called 'One Shot'. It's used by sign painters. The thing about it is that it's very opaque yet brilliant in color. It has a very liquid flow to it. Then it dries very flat, shiny. It's a very hard finish so people use it for outdoor signs."

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But after five years plus some months later, McCollough stopped using the enamel because she learned that the paint is not healthy for a person to use.

So she now paints with acrylics and watercolors, including *gauche*, an opaque watercolor. "When I do watercolors or gouache, it's a brain rest for me. I look at what's in front of me and try to render it ... But mostly I'm imagining a situation or a character or a combination of events. They're all cartoonish or often jokey."

In October 2012, some McCollough paintings were shown in separate exhibitions at two Boston area visual arts venues: **The Big Bad** show at the Nave Gallery in Somerville and **The Inspection House** at the Atlantic Works Gallery in East Boston.



"The pieces that I put in **The Big Bad** were more on the general idea of vengeful gods,

Nature, volcanoes, destroyed landscapes. The other show [**The Inspection House**] that went on at the same time was specifically on the theme of surveillance. It was a two person show. Matt Keller is more interested in voyeurism and I'm more interested in detectives and spies and government spying," she said.

McCollough's artistic process is complicated. "The [painting] grows as you work on as you work

on it," she explained. "A lot of times, I will sit down and work on it, making marks. But I don't really know what I plan to do yet. Or I might have an idea that's a literary idea but I don't really know to how to make it happen visually yet. So it's a period of experiment.

"I don't really do a lot of preparatory drawings. But I'll draw on the [masonite] and erase or paint out or sand out what I don't want."

While calling her work a type of "conceptual art", McCollough would rather not give a category or name to her style. "I won't do that. That's someone else's task or amusement. I just think we all paint what we paint. If you put yourself into a slot, you're doing yourself a disservice. I would rather be open to possibilities," she said.

McCollough doesn't call her artistic work realistic or abstract. "There are lots of representational elements in all of my work. Just because it's not photorealist doesn't mean that it's abstract either," she said.

McCollough's "Strange Invaders" is a 30" x 30" painting made with

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enamel on masonite. The images in this artwork include bears on black flying saucers, a large bear claw, and a small black house. There are only two bear heads: one of the heads has an angry face and the other head has eyes that seem to act like laser guns that shoot at the small black house and the ground. The bear claw is found at the bottom right of the painting, looks frightening as if ready to swipe at anything or anyone entering its territory.

Another McCollough artwork is called "Everlasting", a 30" x 30" acrylic on wood. As she suggests, "It's [an image] of a wrathful deity wearing an "Ever Last" boxing glove ... You know, Ever Last is a big brand in boxing." The name "Ever Last" is painted on the boxing glove that has an iron-like mechanical, movable device that seems to control the powerful anger inside. There are two red-white winged skulls floating on each side of the boxing glove. Scattered black-white toned clouds loom overhead. A red leafed tree is blasted into the air from the impact of the boxing glove that hit the clouds hard and sends the black-white pieces flying all about. The two skulls, like angels of death, simply look on. This work is a rather frightening, powerful piece.

"The Haunted Hat" is a complex, mystical 20" x 20" painting made with enamel on masonite. McCollough is "not sure what it is about [but she] thought it was funny at the time [of creation]."

"There's something about men's clothing of the thirties and the forties that make those hats that they all wore look so adult and so much more intelligent than the faces underneath them," she said.

The painting has such imagery: a ghostly blue, somewhat transparent looking man's head; four beautiful red flowers with green stems that float near the magical, mystical hat; and several wide red colored stripes that emanate out from this special brown hat with a wide black stripe wrapped around its base. Off to the right of the hat is a multi-pointed star with several different layered hues and styles. The background is mostly painted blue with the background near the hat and the flowers partially shaded white.

"Someone commented that 'Oh, the hat looks so much more real than the head.' And I

said, "Yes, the head is haunting the hat. After his death, the head just misses his hat so much that he comes back to visit it." McCollough said.

Artists that have impacted McCollough consciously - or subconsciously - include Anselm Kiefer, Philip Guston, Francisco José De Goya y Lucientes (Goya), and Pablo Picasso. She said, "There are a lot of artists that I love. I think influences are tricky, though. They can be more direct or they can be less direct and come back from the subconscious. You could have liked something and forgotten about it. Then it comes back - pops up in your painting to haunt you!"

And whether or not Martha McCollough realizes it, her artwork leaves definite images that impress the audience's minds not in a negative but a positive way, only haunting them to make them think outside their world.