

Working South: Paintings and Sketches by Mary Whyte

Mary Whyte

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For ten years, watercolorist Mary Whyte painted the Gullah people, descendants of coastal Carolina slaves and members of a church community near her adopted home on Seabrook Island near Charleston, South Carolina. The result of that work was *Alfreda's World*, a book and traveling exhibition that firmly placed Whyte and her work, not only in the hearts and minds of the Southerners who welcomed her to their world, but in the larger art community. *Working South*, her new body of work, continues the renowned painter's legacy with masterful and sensitive portrayals of Southern workers in the rapidly dying blue-collar jobs that once were plentiful across the region.

Whyte's subjects are shoeshine men, farmers, mill workers, fishermen, a sponge diver, a hat maker, and crab pickers in their aprons and caps—black, white, old, or young, they are proud, yet somehow fragile when seen against the backdrop of the changes that are sweeping away their livelihoods. Whyte makes palpable the textures, colors, and time-worn sag of aged skin; the rich dark tones of her African-American subjects, the rosy glow on the faces of those who work outdoors, and the smooth, hopeful radiance of youth, are captured with equal skill. Light, in her hands, becomes a subject in itself: a bright aura that seems to emanate from within an everyday person or sunlight bathing a bee-keeper in radiance; in its absence, menacing shadows foretell a difficult, unsettled future.

Instead of bringing her subjects into her studio, Whyte fully entered their worlds and surrounded herself with what they saw, heard, smelled, and felt as they wielded the tools of their trades. Going far beyond mere technical skill, she reveals the soul of the working people she paints; her accompanying journal entries bring readers into the happenings and creative process that gave rise to the art.

Whyte is also a teacher and the author of two art instruction books. Her portraits are included in numerous private, university, and corporate collections as well as in the permanent collections of several museums. Her work has been featured in national and international publications, and can also be seen at Coleman Fine Art, in Charleston.

Mary Whyte had moved to coastal South Carolina seeking a place that felt warm and nurturing after a bout with cancer; her new home welcomed her, nourished her spirit, and offered her its gifts: "Every place, every person has a story to tell," she wrote. "As artists, our mission is to tell that story—not as journalists, but more as poets." And this she does, with consummate skill. *Working South* is exquisite; beautifully designed, executed, and bound, it is the legacy of a gifted artist who has honored and preserved a way of life that is rapidly disappearing.

Sample illustrations and an exhibition tour schedule can be found at workingsouth.com.

KRISTINE MORRIS (April 1, 2011)

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