

Family Portrait

BY NORM POWERS



The career of the Tryon-based painter Margaret Curtis can be divided into two halves, separated by the major life change that came with the birth of her first child. Before that signal event, her work had drawn its energy from the New York art scene of the 1990s, and found its focus in issues of gender and sexual politics. "It was in your face," Margaret says of her output from those days in Manhattan, the work visceral and startling enough that it was included in the New Museum's fabled *Bad Girls* exhibition of 1994.

"I took great delight in using paint in new and unorthodox ways." Back then, she favored a thick impasto laid on with everything from cake decorating tools to potato ricers. "I was mainly creating a world of feminine hyperbole and excess. The paintings were ribald and fun in subject matter and paint handling," Margaret says. During her nearly two decades living and working in New York, Margaret's canvases were frequently seen on gallery and museum walls both in the city and in Chicago, London and at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, among many other venues.



But in 2004 the first of her two children arrived, just a few weeks after Margaret had finished the last of her "Bad Girl"-era paintings. "It was a huge change in my life, as it is for everyone," Margaret says of newfound motherhood, "and I stopped painting cold turkey for the next five years. I know there are artists out there who can have a child and keep working, but I couldn't." During those five years, Margaret and her journalist husband had a second child and, in 2009, moved to Tryon, where the urge to paint reasserted itself. "She's such a talented painter," says Connie Bostic, the Asheville-based contemporary artist and a frequent painting companion of Margaret's who owns some of her early, New York-era work. "Her color palette is unusual and she has a very pure line. There was a lot of sexuality in her early work, but it's quite different now."

A major difference is Margaret's embrace of portraiture. It wasn't an easy transition for her but has become an appropriate format for her current work exploring broader social issues, particularly the legacy of the colonialism that afflicted her Bermuda-born, difficult and emotionally distant father, who was so entrenched in the glories of Empire that he made sure to teach his children the proper way to bow and curtsy before royalty, even when the family relocated to Chattanooga, Tennessee when Margaret was barely out of her toddler years. "It's funny that while my girlfriends were listening to David Cassidy, I was learning

how to curtsy before the Queen and judge red wine — in Tennessee in the '70s," Margaret says.

Bearing not a few psychologically tender wounds from her family history, Margaret struggled with a way to express them on canvas, finally hitting on portraiture as a vehicle. "Portraits can be so retrograde," Margaret says. "Commercial portraiture seems to say nothing more about their subjects than 'I can afford to pay for this!' But I took some commissions to force myself into getting serious and figuring out how I could turn a face in a way that seemed fresh." Luckily, one of those commissions was from a couple who gave her complete freedom in her interpretation, the result being Gary and James, portrayed in delicate, Hockney-like line and color posed in their library with their dogs. In a nod to her fondness for the portraits of Van Eyck, Margaret even inserted into the picture the prominent and ornate mirror with which Van Eyck frequently adorned his work, reflecting back to the viewer the room behind the painter. "The painting was charmed and came up really fast," Margaret says. "I was having so much fun painting it, and one day in the studio while I was working on it a whole series of paintings just appeared in my head. I think this body of work has been forming in the murky recesses of my brain for years and only made itself known when I finally mastered the technical skills to express it."

While the series of enigmatic works, fraught with disturbing undertones of decay and torment that betray their bright palette, is drawn from Margaret's family history, they stand on their own merits as portrayals of lonely figures lost in some mysterious limbo, caught between two worlds and uncertain where their future lies. "Her work speaks volumes, but in so subtle a way as to leave the viewer mildly disturbed," says Jolene Mechanic of Asheville's Flood Gallery, which featured Margaret's work in its 2011 show *Uncharted Waters*. "She has plenty to say, and in ways that don't require that she ever open her mouth to do it. It's very, very powerful work."

Using colors normally associated with more emotionally bland work, canvases like Margaret's *End of Empire* — with its lush green garden setting, supine child and proper British matron in a bright blue dress — set up a tension between the perceived and the hidden, the light of day and the blurrier outlines of the unconscious. Like lilies floating on a tranquil pond, the work's roots lie deep down, buried in a dark place.

Margaret freely acknowledges that darkness, even embraces it as her artistic inspiration. "There are two kinds of people in the world," Margaret says, "those people whose shoes fit and people whose shoes don't. The people with good shoes walk around comfortable and relatively happy. But it's different for those of us with bad shoes. We're uncomfortable. We're always looking for something that fits us better. I'm having a great time in my life and am thrilled to be painting again, but I think it's a great privilege not to question the world around you. It's a privilege I have never enjoyed."

*Margaret Curtis is one of almost 70 Asheville area artists participating in the exhibit *Waking Up with Van Gogh* at the Hickory Museum of Art from April 7th through July 29. Contact Margaret Curtis at mavy9@aol.com.*