



Self-Portrait at 62
Oil on linen 72" × 42"

Jim McVicker ~ The View from Up North

by Molly Siple

IN THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF CALIFORNIA IS HUMBOLT COUNTY with its stands of old growth redwoods and more than 110 miles of coastline, mostly rugged and wild. Humbolt is also home to **California Art Club Artist Member Jim McVicker**, a noted landscape painter of this richly varied terrain. At last fall's **Laguna Plein Air Painters Association (LPAPA)** paint-out in Laguna, McVicker won Best of Show for one of his landscapes, but at last spring's CAC Gold Medal Juried Exhibition he also won two honours for his still

life, titled *Self-Portrait*, the Southwest Art Magazine Award of Excellence and the Franz Bischoff Award for Best Still Life. McVicker is highly accomplished in both genres and also conjures up compelling portraits. But regardless of subject matter, his works share a common mastery of light and dimension. His imagery possesses a palpable depth and also conveys a certain calmness, a reflection of McVicker's own inner quiet and focus. Looking at one of his paintings stills the viewer's mind, making what he portrays unexpectedly intriguing.

McVicker is an intense observer of the things around him and what he sees determines what he paints. As he says, "My subject matter is what informs me so that every painting can be fresh and unique." Looking through his considerable output of landscapes, you won't find generic McVicker trees and the like. As he says, "I never want to fall into a comfort zone. I keep pushing myself for a greater understanding of what I see, a

visual world full of surprises, and the wonders of nature." He continues, "I want to show the everyday and real, not some correct or pretty version of things. Whether it's a seascape I'm painting and the wind suddenly whips up waves that I had started to paint while they were gentle, or I'm working on a street scene that includes dilapidated buildings, I want to make the effort to show life as it really is. The beauty and ugliness all combined deserves to be honoured."

He takes the same approach with his still lifes. "I want the final image to be what you'd see if you just walked into the room and saw everything sitting wherever it is. In painting these, I work intuitively rather than trying for some classic artistic order." In fact the arrangements he paints often do break the rules of 'good composition'. There are odd overlaps, unusual balancing acts of large items with very small, as well as objects seen from the side or cut off as they meet the edge

of the canvas. He also likes having some fun with his 'mistakes'. In a plein air self-portrait, McVicker shows himself wearing a cap that is receiving bright sunlight from above, while the visor on the cap keeps his face in shadow so that at first glance it's hard to tell who it is.

RAISED IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, McVicker will tell you that although he had lots of friends, he didn't at all mind spending time by himself. No surprise then that he charted his own course as he set out to become an artist. It wasn't until age twenty-one when his artist-girlfriend gave him access to her art books and art supplies that he first picked up a paint brush. "I started reading about the French Impressionists and tried copying **Sisley**, **Pissarro**, and even **Toulouse Lautrec**. I also began life-drawing and painting classes at the local community college. The year was



Morning Shadows, Trinidad State Beach
Oil on linen 24" × 36"



Still life with Pansies

Oil on linen 40" × 36"

1973 and they weren't teaching real fundamentals, but I was fascinated and knew almost immediately that painting would fill my life and become my career."

At age twenty-four McVicker quit his day job to paint fulltime, despite the concerns of his parents who nonetheless chose to support him in his endeavors, much to their credit, which he is quick to acknowledge. What followed were fourteen lean years during which he set out to learn to paint, but with few sales. For the first couple of years, McVicker tried his hand at abstract art, having seen a film, *Painters Painting*, which featured notables such as **Franz Kline (1910–1962)**, **Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)**, and **Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)**. "Seeing how they spontaneously put paint on canvas was so freeing to me. I was fascinated with their gestural brushwork and emphasis on design." And he adds with a laugh, "I started saying all the clichés like, 'realism is dead and why do you need to paint a landscape when you can take a photo of it?'"

With his charming frankness he also tells of his first one-man exhibit which featured his abstracts, at a gallery in Santa Cruz. The wine that McVicker had ordered for the event was delivered early and the gallery owner, who lived above the gallery, drank it all. As the actual reception began, the gallerist was already upstairs in a stupor. McVicker ordered more wine and when his mother arrived to see his work, he had also by then had a

few glassfuls, and as he recalls, "The evening ended with no sales and my mother taking me to dinner to have a little celebration regardless of how the opening went."

TO TRIM HIS LIFE-STYLE TO ITS MOST AFFORDABLE AND thereby continue to paint, in 1977 McVicker moved to Humboldt to settle among its small lumberjack towns where rents were low, winters mild, and there was, and still is, a thriving university scene and artistic community in and around Eureka, the principal city in Humboldt. As McVicker says, "Here I had the great good fortune to meet other artists, all landscape painters—**Stock Schluetes**, **Jim Moore**, **Curtis Otto**, and in particular **George Van Hook**." And he continues, "In a sense I am self-taught in that I never had formal art training, but I give these guys a lot of credit for helping me learn how to paint. They were far more technically advanced than I was, but they let me jump in with them and join their painting treks. I could look over their shoulders and watch them work. We talked art. We critiqued each other's paintings, and for two years I shared a studio with Van Hook, We all painted together almost daily for more than three years, putting in twelve-hour days." McVicker also began a ten-year commitment to attend figure-drawing sessions twice a week.

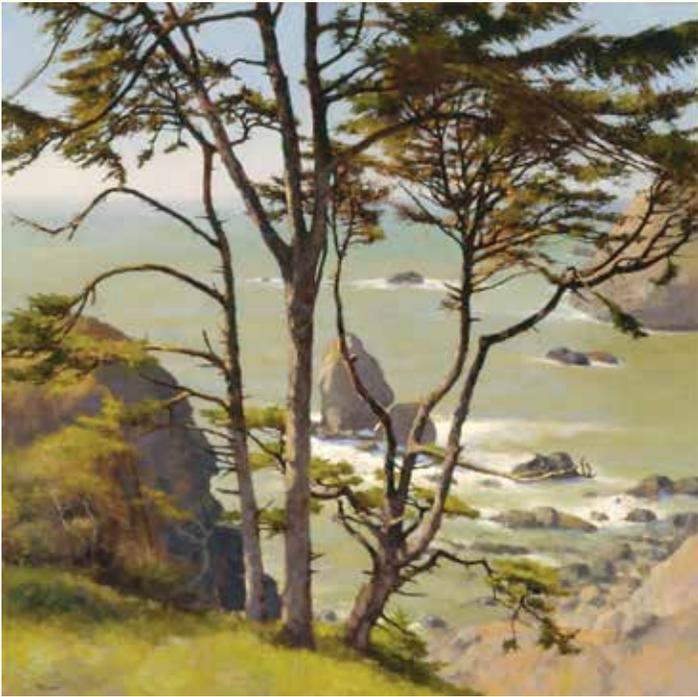
But above all, McVicker credits his wife, artist **Theresa Oats**, whom he describes as "my biggest fan, the person who has always been there for me and supported my work whatever direction it takes." The couple married in 1989 and bought a house in Loleta, a dot on the map surrounded by beautiful farmland. For the first three years they found the views from their property so engaging, they painted all their landscapes right from home, and ten years ago they built their studios next to the house. "Terry is the one artist," says McVicker, "whom I trust the most to critique my work and give me fresh insights. We've been painting partners for thirty years and I've learned so much from her."

His time spent painting abstractly also gave McVicker an



July Garden

Oil on linen 40" × 60"



North Coast Cypress

Oil on linen 40" × 36"

advantage as he tackled plein air painting. "I had learned to trust my intuition," he says, "and to be spontaneous. Working from my imagination doing abstracts in my studio broke down any fear barriers I might have had of trying to paint in a new way. When the Humboldt artists asked me to join them, I was able to just plunge in. From the start, I brought large canvases on location, put down lots of paint, and made lots of mistakes, a great way to learn. No painting for me is ever too precious." Thanks to a sensitive and elegant film, created in 2009 by Norwegian filmmakers **Peter Granrud** and **John Carter**, *Jim McVicker — A Way of Seeing*, viewable on YouTube, you can watch as he deftly starts a plein air canvas. His brushwork is light, quick, and accurate, a combination of this spontaneity, plus years of practicing *seeing*.

ON LOCATION, McVICKER OCCASIONALLY PAINTS THE usual 9" × 12" plein air works, but also often paints as large as 30" × 40" and 36" × 48". To finish one of these works can require six to fifteen sessions. If the weather changes or spring suddenly turns into summer, he may put a painting on hold until the same time the following year before he continues working on it. Such an extended schedule suits McVicker's easy-going temperament just fine. "I'll watch the skies over several days and paint a combination that suits my composition."

When the weather is good in this cooler and rainier part of the state, McVicker is up at day break to head out to paint and, loving his work as he does, continues until sundown. In summer and fall you'll likely find him painting the coast near Trinidad, with its rocky sea stacks, rough surf, and trailing fog, the long days making the twenty-five-mile drive from home possible in sunlight in this region of unlit rural roads. Then in the winter and early spring, on sunny days, he'll be painting the countryside near home, with its farmlands, dairies, rivers, and mountains with snow. "I especially love painting this

season with its low light and mix of evergreens and deciduous trees—so many wonderful warm and cool greens to paint and the violets in the stark tree branches."

What brings McVicker indoors to paint his still lifes and portraits is the weather. As he says, "I have always preferred to paint in fair weather with its bounced light and shadows. On grey days I head for my studio." Here, you'll find his extensive collection of paintable objects—the vases, pots, favourite plants, and intricately patterned antique carpets he's collected over the years that show up regularly in his many well-known still lifes. Now, instead of the tense and urgent painting of plein air, he works more meditatively. His first pass on a large still life transpires over a few days, and then the slow build up to the completed work continues for a few weeks, a month, or even longer. "I feel equally drawn to painting plein air and studio work, so I am always working on more than one painting at a time which can drive me a bit crazy. But it's also very stimulating and I've worked this way now for almost forty years."

Two years ago McVicker, the long-time student, began teaching workshops at venues near his home as well as last fall at the **Sedona Art Center** in Arizona where he was the keynote speaker at the 10th Annual Sedona Plein Air Festival. He knows well how difficult painting can be and now also knows the thrill of success, and speaks from experience when he tells his students, "In every painting at some point, you'll have a problem with it and you'll want to throw your painting out. But, if you just keep sticking with it—and that's the challenge—you'll do alright in the end." ■

Notes:

Senior Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an Artist Member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou** and **Jove Wang**. Siple is a frequent contributor to numerous national art publications, and co-author of *Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island* as well as *California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club*.



Luffenboltz Beach

Oil on linen 38" × 50"