
The Gift of IMAGINATION

PEGGY MCGIVERN

SIFTS THROUGH THE OLD
TO FIND NEW VISION

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

THE LITTLE VALLEY just below Peggy McGivern's childhood home in rural Minnesota was a magical spot for a young girl. Thick with trees and tangled undergrowth, it was the perfect setting for an imaginary barn and corral where a well-loved imaginary Thoroughbred was cared for, or a pretend castle to which a stately horse would carry a princess.

But there was an unusual twist in McGivern's world of daydreams: In every case, she was not the princess but the horse. She was the one galloping through the woods or being groomed, completely escaping—for a time—the confusion of a home darkened by the alcoholism of her talented, artistic, often neglectful mother. "Way back then, I learned I could switch to the right side of my brain, into my imagination. I could just *believe*. I really believed I was a horse," McGivern

says. In fact, her memoir-in-progress is titled *When I Was Six I Was a Horse*.

As soon as McGivern began drawing and painting, she realized that her ability to easily shift into an inventive, non-linear mode was as perfect for art as it was for pretending. At the same time, the strength of her imagination allowed her to believe she could do whatever she put her mind to. "It had so much to do with me becoming an artist," she says.

One of her favorite recent paintings taps directly into that creative zone: **WHAT CIRCUS PONIES WERE MEANT FOR** depicts a young girl standing confidently on the back of a pony, her blue dress matching the blue of the two-toned animal. The curve of the pony's neck echoes the arch of the girl's back as she gracefully stretches her arms toward a bright red bird in a tree. When McGivern began the



representation

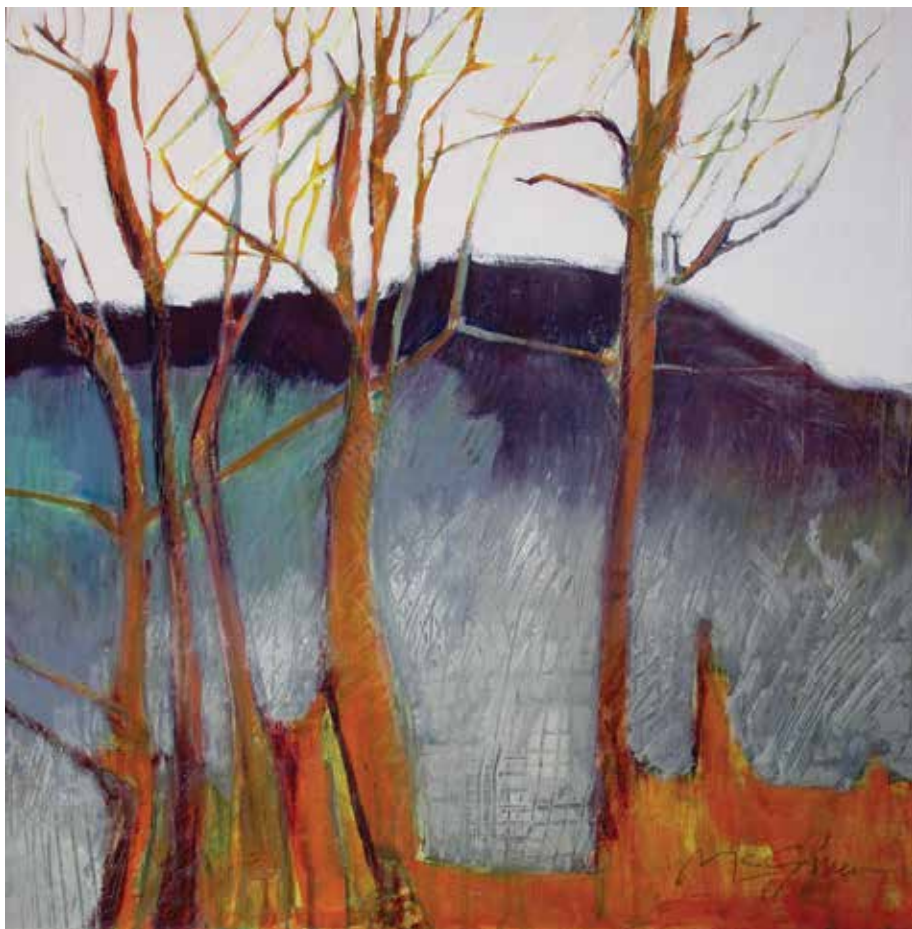
Saks Galleries, Denver, CO;
Jones Walker of Taos, Taos, NM;
Alexandra Stevens Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; **Wilde Meyer Gallery**, Scottsdale and Tucson, AZ.

upcoming shows

Solo retrospective, **Saks Galleries**, September 18-October 9.
Solo show, **Jones Walker of Taos**, May 1-28, 2021.



What Circus Ponies Were Meant For, mixed media, 60 x 48.



Valley Mist, mixed media, 24 x 24.

piece, she simply painted a horse. She had no narrative in mind, but followed her imagination's surprising, fanciful lead. "That painting felt like I was really on the right side of my brain," she says.

AS WITH horses and a rich inner life, art has been part of McGivern's world from her earliest memories. Her maternal grandmother was an accomplished painter, her grandfather was a commercial artist, and McGivern's mother was an art-school graduate who won awards but wasn't able to translate her talent into a career. In part this was a reflection of her generation's focus on women as mothers and wives—Peggy was one of six children. And in part it resulted from cocktail hours that began early and often overtook her days. Still, McGivern remembers times, especially as her mother

grew older, when the two would talk at length about art while her mother painted. "My mother taught me as much about perspective, anatomy, and composition as any other teacher I ever had," she says.

When Peggy was not quite 12, the family moved from Minnesota to Colorado for her father's job with Chrysler. At 13 she got her first real horse, which she kept in a nearby field at a time when much of the area surrounding Denver was still rural. High school brought art teachers who recognized and encouraged her artistic gifts. It also brought a plan for freeing herself from parental dysfunction, emotional abuse, and pain. At 15, Peggy and her 16-year-old boyfriend decided she would get pregnant so she could move out of her family's home. Which she did. The marriage lasted five years, leaving her with two young children to raise on her own.

McGivern soon left Colorado, meeting a British man and living for a year with her children in Manchester, England. It was there that she began painting seriously, first in watercolor, then acrylic, selling her art from behind the bar in a pub where she worked. When her visa expired (and her relationship had ended), she returned to the United States. She founded the Tulsa Artist Coalition with 20 other artists, establishing the Tulsa Center for Contemporary Art. From there she moved back to Denver and opened a gallery called Genre in what she considered a perfect location—a run-down but diverse area of downtown. She ran the gallery for 10 years, continuing to paint and sell her own art.

In the 1970s McGivern began making periodic visits to Taos, falling in love with the landscape, culture, and quietude of northern New Mexico. When she met her now-husband, Peter Stravlo, she learned that he, too, had been spending time in Taos. For a number of years the couple has had a second home not far from the Taos Plaza, with a view of Taos Mountain, a small vineyard, and a serene, rural feel. Normally they divide their time between there and Denver, and when the coronavirus lockdowns began this spring, McGivern happened to be in Taos. Remaining there for months on end, thanks to New Mexico's strict coronavirus response, has "really opened my eyes to wanting to live here full-time," she says. As she speaks she is sitting in the yard outside the studio she had built onto their 70-year-old adobe house.

IN NORMAL times McGivern and Stravlo also love traveling, an experience that has led to several collaborative books combining her paintings with her husband's poetry or prose. They've spent time in Cuba, Romania, France, Ireland, Italy, Croatia, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Crete. Even a place with less obvious beauty than where she comes from is artistically inspiring, she says. Cuba, for example, "totally changed me. It's a sad place in some ways, but I saw artists there painting on anything they could find because they *had* to paint." In Cuba she glimpsed an attitude that she



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Take It Outside, mixed media, 20 x 24.

has since begun applying more freely in her own art: “Do whatever you feel; don’t worry about what is correct.”

That approach works well with McGivern’s painting process, which calls on her ability to let go of left-brain control. Generally she begins with an idea that suggests a narrative or story, whether landscape or figurative. From

there the possibilities are endless, and the piece continually evolves along the way. Tilting toward abstraction, exaggeration, and often a touch of humor, she first uses the blind contour method to draw in charcoal or acrylic, not looking at the canvas as she sketches. Then she simplifies shapes and refines the composition, adding a layer of color—which

is often “the opposite of reality,” she says. As she works, the underpainting frequently changes, with bits of earlier color showing through as she goes.

Adding splatters of sand, salt, or paint drippings, she builds up texture and then carves and scrapes into it with trowels, palette knives, and homemade tools fashioned from old metal she has

unearthed in her backyard. The textured elements give her “all these weird drips and shapes that I never would have seen otherwise,” she says. Next she adds outline and detail to the image with pastel, charcoal, and graphite, finishing with a clear acrylic glaze. Between layers she

applies a fixative, allowing her to create strata without entirely losing what was underneath. “I can go crazy with the next layer, and little bits of the underlayer will still show through,” she says.

McGivern’s subject matter also frequently dips into layers—of memory,

time, and a child’s dreamlike way of seeing the world. In the past couple of years she has been especially drawn to nostalgic imagery inspired by old family photographs. As she was making her way through a trunk full of old photos, her brother died. Suddenly pictures of him





The Muse, mixed media, 36 x 36.



▲ **Clean Up, mixed media, 16 x 20.**

◀ **Nine Rows to Go, mixed media, 36 x 36.**

at various points in his life were being posted on social media by family members and friends. The experience of loss, combined with an influx of old images, reinforced her interest in creating visual stories suggestive of times past. Other works begin with tracing the outline of simple figurines, like the antique hand-carved wooden farmer, farmer's wife, and cow that Peggy's grandmother gave her when she was a child.

While McGivern uses simplicity of form to evoke an earlier or timeless moment, she also celebrates ways in which she has risen above her own past. *THE MUSE* is one such piece. A woman in a blue-and-white striped dress wears a hat that doubles as a bird's nest rimmed with cascading flowers, stems, and leaves. Her knowing expression speaks of having gained a measure of wisdom on the journey through life. "I feel like she is my muse," the artist says. "She's all-natural—she's got a nest coming out of her head. To me, she's very sure of herself, which I strive for, but I don't always make it. I can sometimes still hear my mother's voice in my head, telling me I'm not good enough. So the muse is my answer to that."

Over the years, other artists and art movements have also stimulated McGivern's visual voice. Among them are French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as the Bay Area Figurative painters of the 1950s and '60s. Yet, these influences—as with old photos, memories, things she sees or reads in daily life, and her own deep well of imagination—are all simply jumping-off points. With a growing sense of freedom to follow her muse, she says, "I can paint what I want." ♦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

See more of McGivern's work at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
mcgivern-p-sep2020](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/mcgivern-p-sep2020).