

BY GAIL SACHSON



Above, from left: Mary Vernon, *Still Life with Don Pedro de Barberana*, 2009, oil on gessobord, 30 x 30 in.; Mary Vernon, *Iliad*, 2012, oil and ink on gessobord, 36 x 36 in. Mary Vernon, *Still Life with Tiger and Fox*, 2010, oil and paper on gessobord, 36 x 36 in. Opposite: Mary Vernon in her studio.

# A PAINTERLY STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

2017 Dallas Art Fair Artist Honoree Mary Vernon, Professor of Painting and Drawing at SMU, Meadows School of the Arts, likes to surprise us.

She likes to make us smile. Her twinkling, troublemaking eyes are a giveaway. Her grayish white, spiky hair, a confirmation. Projecting an assured stance and an engaging “Dennis the Menace” smile, she heard a fan say, “She is a work of art herself.” Mary Vernon is a painter who brazenly and unexpectedly paints a curious cheetah into a traditional garden landscape, Spode china in a forest, and flowers as big as a house. Her vivid imagination and uncensored recollections energize and embellish the serenity of what might be an all too perfectly composed scene.

She seduces us to imagine a bizarre narrative, but titles her work with just enough information for identification, such as *Coffee Cup with Rabbit*. Disdaining “bossy” descriptive titles, she prefers to stand back and startle us. We delight in her creative carelessness with paint, her attention to line, and her quirky sense of humor, and remain delightfully puzzled.

Although a world traveler, Vernon draws first and foremost upon her memories of the Pecos Valley of southern New Mexico, where she grew up. Through her paintings, we are welcomed into her personal world of stream of consciousness—mountains, landscapes, Chinese temples, flower gardens, dogs, deer,

antelopes, and rabbits. Her lively remembrances of home and travels around the globe to China, Japan, and Chile, where she was the US State Department Visiting Artist, are communicated with fluid brushstrokes, which morph into wolves, sensuous, quivering lines, and accidental drips which decide to be tree trunks.

“The materials call the shots,” says Vernon. “These paintings tell the story of their own making. Paint knows so much more about painting than I do.” She notes, “The landscape taught me what to look for... It was invented as a vehicle for a concept,” and the animals which appear, often incongruously, are “characters in a play who come down to the floodlights and take center stage.” They speak for the joy of the painting, for the artist discovering the painting.

A devoted Vernon collector says, “Mary Vernon’s art makes me happy. It brings me joy. It makes me feel like I have a new lease on life.” Vernon’s art will make a lot more people happy when, as the 2017 Dallas Art Fair Honoree, twenty of her oil paintings on panel will grace the windows of the downtown Neiman Marcus flagship store for one month beginning March 20th. The fashionable frocks will be chosen to compliment Vernon’s color-rich fine art. “It will be my first drive-by art exhibition,” Vernon

Mary Vernon photographed by her student Luis Nanini.



says with a smile.

Vernon was selected to be honoree because of her impact on the local arts community, the honors, awards, the leadership roles she has assumed, and the rich legacy she leaves. She will be retiring from a fifty-year teaching career at Southern Methodist University this year. She was chair of the Art Department from 1987–1995 and has been honored with the prestigious Meadows Foundation Distinguished Professorship and the Moss/Chumley North Texas Artist Award. Mary Vernon may be retiring, but she is certainly not retreating.

“Now I get to do my real job, painting in my studio.” It will be a busy retirement for Vernon. The Grace Museum in Abilene will mount a major show of her work September 15, 2017. Valley House Gallery, which represents her locally, will be showing her work at the Dallas Art Fair and installing her one-person show in their North Dallas gallery September 20 of this year. Works can be seen locally at Cafe 43 at the George W. Bush Presidential Center, The Clements Hospital Art Collection at Southwestern Medical School, Meadows Museum, and the Dallas Country Club. The Art in Embassies program recently purchased a work for installation in Africa.

Vernon may have fans worldwide, but the strongest voices are from those she has mentored while teaching. Juan Alberto Negroni, one of the 2017 SMU/MFA students under her charge and her graduate assistant, says, “Mary Vernon has been such a wonderful light to follow. Her words are precise, strong, and full of confidence, experience, and transparency. Being close to her and being able to watch her teach is nothing but a winning experience where every word and every second counts.”

Vernon stresses the importance of attention in drawing, in teaching, and in life. The windows at Neiman Marcus will surely get our attention, and passers-by will go on with their day a lot happier because of Mary Vernon’s art. **P**