

Local artists take part in the Great American Paint In

A talk with Dottie Leatherwood and Marc Hanson

WHEN the pandemic made its way to Savannah, Dottie Leatherwood and Marc Hanson packed up their Whitmarsh Island studio and relocated to their home on Tybee.

It was quite the adjustment for the painters.

“We share a lobby with a doctor’s office, so when this all got started, it was a bit unnerving,” recalls Leatherwood. “At first, we didn’t think there was much of anything to it—it just seemed like the flu. And then it just kept getting bigger and scarier, and you really didn’t have any idea what to do.”



When quarantine first began, even outdoor activities were limited for the pair: Tybee Island was largely off-limits, and their favorite spot, Fort Pulaski, was also closed. One day, Leatherwood was approached by her Facebook friend Michael Wintermantel, a fellow artist, to share a new project with her: the Great American Paint In.

Created by Bill Weinaug, owner of Gallery CERO in Wekiva Island, Florida, the Great American Paint In seeks to document how artists are making their way through this unprecedented time.

“Our vision for this project is to build a marketplace where America’s greatest artists can share their 2020 world pandemic experience through their art,” said Weinaug on the project’s website. “We will strive to collect and make this art available to the world through this website, and ultimately share it in a beautifully published tabletop book.”

The project culls a wide variety of painting styles from artists across the country. A quick scroll through the sprawling collection reveals an impressive range of subjects and styles.

Leatherwood and Hanson are primarily landscape painters, so the work they submitted for the collection was of scenes that meant a lot to them.



Leatherwood's painting is a seascape of Tybee Island that she found to be particularly indicative of the current moment.

"It's a really pretty blue sky day, lots of puffy clouds," she recounts, "but interestingly enough, the seagulls down there were just all facing the wind and then they were all about six or eight feet apart, scattered across. I'd earmarked the photo a while back, and as I was looking at it, I noticed the gulls were social distancing on their own. I thought it was pretty appropriate."

Hanson's painting is of a favorite spot up near Blowing Rock in North Carolina.

"It's a place that we would have liked to have gone to over the last month or two," he says. "It's a place of solitude. Any time you're along a little stream, it's a pretty peaceful place."

While Leatherwood and Hanson both primarily paint from photo references, they also like to paint outside when they get the chance.

"As most artists, I've got more photos and reference materials than I can paint in 50 lifetimes," says Leatherwood. "But because we paint outside a good bit, it's both easier and harder sometimes to paint from photographs. You know what's missing when you take a photograph; it's just never as good as it is standing out there in front of it."

"But you can adjust for what you know to be probably true in the photographs. A lot of times, when you're outside painting, there are things out there you don't have the time to paint. It's something you wouldn't go back into the studio to do bigger or differently; it was fleeting."

"Normally, if we feel like we need to go outside to get some information, we'll just go do it, and that was not as easy to do," adds Hanson. "We paint outside a lot, and you find areas that are accommodating, friendly, easy to get to, and all those places were shut down. If you work from photographs in the studio, you're always missing something. It's nice to be able to run out, take a look at a palmetto or something if you need to."

Another perk that Hanson found during quarantine was that it slowed both the painters down.

"It slows you down a little bit; you consider things a little bit more," he explains. "But at first, you're a little panicked by that."

The Great American Paint In is unique in that the artists keep the work instead of submitting it to the gallery. All sales can be conducted through the shop function on the website. As such, the paintings will remain on sale for a while.

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