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CHARLOTTESVILLE NEWS & ARTS

Magic touch

Inside the funny, scary world of Russ Warren

by : Brendan Fitzgerald

"O.K., I have had enough. What else can you show me?"

—Bob Dylan, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleedin')"

One night in 1973, Russ Warren went to his Houston home, pulled a large sheet of paper from a stack, and composed a grid—dozens and dozens of 1.5" squares. He sharpened one pencil, another, another. He gathered brushes, watercolor paints, and India ink at his kitchen table.

"I said, 'I'm going to stay up all night long until I have a picture in every one of these squares,'" said Warren.

It took all night. He started at 8pm, and finished at 4:30am, a half-hour before he needed to be at his next odd job. He left for work without looking at the paper.

"I came back at night and looked at it, and thought, 'Wow,'" Warren said. "My subconscious kind of took over, and all these images that I grew up with kind of came up in the work. And I thought, 'I've got a whole dictionary of images to pull from, here.'"

Those images found their way into a 23-year-old Warren's first major show, alongside his mentor at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Earl Staley. Many became massive papier-mâché sculptures that Warren suspended from the Beaumont Art Museum ceiling—bulls, ashtrays from Stuckey's restaurant chain, revolvers, Southern icons and figures all. Faces from Warren's grid appeared atop Mexican folk-art sculptures and Day of the Dead figures.

Painter Russ Warren with his Martin guitar. Before he began his art studies, Warren pursued his musical ambitions in Texas, where he opened for Lightning Hopkins and Townes Van Zandt. Now, his guitars share space with stacks of canvases in his Charlottesvilles studio.

Those years—loosely, 1973 to 1975—were the most prolific in Warren's career. They brought him out of Texas to shows in Florida and Louisiana, where curators took note and later invited him to world-class shows in New York and Venice. They gradually upped the price of his work, from $500 for the 5' x 5' pieces he first showed to the $12,000 to $14,000 his *Mare* series typically commanded during the late '90s. They earned Warren a place in *Painting in the South*, a 400-year survey of vital American artists, and prompted writer Donald Kuspit to praise Warren for his pop-culture acumen and "Southern insanity."

"This is madcap, funhouse art, deliberately bizarre and almost routinely naïve—artificially naïve to give us some distance from the urgency of its theme," wrote Kuspit.

Since that night in 1973, Warren has never wanted for images. "I've got so many ideas, I just can't do 'em fast enough," he said, now 40 years into his painting career. "Do one, and three more are born."

Warren's particular breed of Southern insanity never left him. But from its peak in the mid-'80s, and following the Washington, D.C.-based Corcoran Gallery of Art's 41st biennial, it began to find smaller crowds. He increasingly showed closer to home—Davidson, North Carolina, where he taught for nearly three decades, then Charlottesville, Virginia, where he moved after marrying gallery owner Lyn Bolen in 2005.

Now, however, Warren has returned to his manic pace and mighty scale. A few years ago, he began a series called *From Magic Mountain*—big, 4' x 5' pieces painted in Picasso-sized brushstrokes and finished with titles that pun on Bob Dylan and Rolling Stones songs. They're piled high with Texas cattle, Mexican skulls and other images from Warren's life and career—Paso Fino horses, dogs, guitars.

"You're always borrowing from somebody, like Juan Gris or Roy De Forest or Jim Nutt," said Warren, who turns 60 in December. "But now I'm borrowing on myself. And I just can't keep up with the materials. I just go faster than anybody expects me to go."

The art world values no man for long; it abandoned Warren's type years ago, and chose new figures and different visions. Some, like fellow Southerner William Christenberry, showed work alongside Warren's, and then continued their public ascent while his profile diminished.

But now, Warren is a sort of Prospero character—a wizard at the height of his powers, his spells mastered and multiplying daily. His next show, *While We Sleep*, opens on his own magic mountain on October 6. And he is making the best work of his life, faster than you can fathom.

A song for Russ Warren

Here's one Russ Warren magic trick: He plays an upside-down guitar better than most folks play a normal one. In fact, before the left-handed painter enrolled in St. Thomas' art program, he planned to join the music school. As a teenager in Houston, he regularly went to Sand Mountain Coffee House to hear country-folk musicians like Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. During one of the venue's weekly audition nights, Warren played for a spot in Clark's band.

From a 1976 invitational show at the Beaumont Art Museum in Beaumont, Texas. During the '70s, Warren generated a "dictionary of images"—from leering cowboys to rotund steer—that he continues to recraft and reappropriate.

"Guy Clark heard me and said, 'We'll give you a job. The way you play is so funky–– upside down and backwards–– we gotta keep you on,'" said Warren. He laughs easily, keeps his thin arms by his sides as he talks, and opens his expressive, large eyes for effect.

In early 2010, I interviewed Warren at his home, a brick building on 30 acres of land, atop a wooded hill in northern Albemarle. During our talk, he mentioned a gig opening for Texas blues legend Lightning Hopkins. After my initial reaction—shock, sure, but also envy and curiosity—I tried to steer us back to the interview and to focus my attention on something other than the well-kept, dustless Martin guitar in his studio corner.

"I don't want to waste your time on non-art things," Warren told me at the time. "But my amp, over there…" And we were lost.

Over the course of the next year, Warren and I got together together to play the songs he played as a teenager, or played to his wife when they first met, or that we had in common. Gram Parsons' "Return of the Grievous Angel," or Tom Petty's "The Image of Me." Blues songs recorded by Mississippi John Hurt, like "The Ballad of Casey Jones," or "Make Me a Pallet on your Floor." Songs we inherited and could leave our marks on. It took nearly as long for me to learn the tricks of his hands and the stutter of his inverted guitar, which produced sounds as bright and broad as his brush strokes.

Warren is a link in a musical chain. His father, a World War II vet and former president of the Pennzoil Product Company, sang in a quartet called the Free Lunch Four. His oldest daughter is the principal clarinet in the Charlottesville and University Symphony Orchestra. But in 1969, he didn't find the St. Thomas music program to his liking. He asked the art department what he needed to do to declare an art major, and was told to submit a portfolio.

"I said, 'I've got one,'" says Warren. "I stayed up all night long, drawing and drawing, making collages. I never slept. I put it all in a portfolio, and walked in. They looked at it, and said, 'Sign him up.'" He studied with Staley for two years, and then continued on to the University of New Mexico before returning to Houston and taking over Beaumont.

Paradise found and lost

Minimalism, abstraction and darkness never attracted Warren like the works of "funk art" painters like Staley and Nutt, or the restless experimentation of Picasso—a man who shares a place in Warren's heart alongside Bob Dylan and Keith Richards. (When he ran away to New York at age 14, Warren had two goals: Hear Bob Dylan perform live, and see cubist art.) For his post-college exhibitions, Warren painted massive acrylic steer the colors of sun-bleached Texas flags and Sante Fe jewelry, and took home a few "Best in Show" awards for his work. One such award, from the 1980 New Orleans Museum of Art Triennial, was given by Marcia Tucker, who founded New York City's New Museum in 1977.

Tucker, says Warren, was interested in "eccentric artists from the South." She also was a restless experimenter, a former Whitney Museum of American Art curator who'd booked big shows for the likes of Bruce Nauman and Laurie Anderson.

Tucker's shows weren't universally beloved—a fact she owns up to in her memoir, *A Short Life of Trouble*. For a 1978 exhibition at the New Museum, she both coined the phrase "bad painting" (meant ironically) and amassed its figures, including Staley and artists like William Wegman, whose work largely encompasses beautiful and irreverent photos of his dogs. The verdict from Newsweek: "Unfortunately, most of it is really bad."

But Tucker was good, even more vibrant and essential in retrospect than in life. Warren says Tucker was "a celebrity, and everybody knew her, and was courting her." However, "she kept secret what she was looking for, so nobody ever knew what she was looking for."

In the 1980s, she was looking for Warren. After participating in the 1981 Whitney Biennial and a 1983 show in Houston with Christenberry, Warren was one of a handful of artists to represent America at the 1984 Venice Biennale. As U.S. Commissioner, Tucker curated the American Pavilion, and assembled a show titled *Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained: American Visions of the New Decade*.

Tucker writes in her memoir that she aimed for several lesser-known artists. "The critics hated it," she adds.

Warren has worked at a pace unrivaled by any in his career since 2008. "We edit what we think is art," says Warren, shown in his studio beside more large canvases. "That's when you stop drawing, when you edit and think, 'This isn't art.'"

Warren is not mentioned in her memoir, but 1984 was not unkind to him. The New York Times said of one show that his work makes "a strong and lasting impact."

The review isn't untrue. But—and I'll take a liberty here—the art world is fickle, and doesn't fight for its citizens. New generations arise and champion their values and aesthetics; some are timeless, some are not. Past generations assert their strengths and skills, and time bludgeons the unlucky and unguarded. Warren is earnest and devoted, but those qualities aren't bulletproof.

Warren modestly says he hasn't changed as a painter, but that's not true. He's better, more vital and honest. He's playful, a mere mortal who laughs in the faces of clocks and calendars and the sheer idea of timelessness. He's joyful, and his paintings are kinetic, searching. They create a body that ages more like that of a tree than that of a man. The art world doesn't cut down trees; it simply finds new forests.

The wizard of magic mountain

Here's one more Russ Warren magic trick: He's fast.

Lyn Bolen studied with Warren at Davidson in 1982, and interned at the Guggenheim with his recommendation. In 1997, a few years after she opened Les Yeux du Monde gallery, she hosted work by Warren and locally based artist John Borden Evans. Warren returned in 1999 with paintings from Mare (*A Work in Progress*)—some of his most memorable works, measuring 4' tall and up to 8' long, horse figures that contain the Pollock whirls of abstract expressionism within their bulging bodies.

When she had an artist cancel in 2003, she called Warren and asked him to show once more. Warren said, "I'll have 22 paintings there in 48 hours." His oil paintings were simpler in size and palette, but prompted UVA's late Picasso scholar, Lydia Gasman, to call them "brilliant distillations of Picasso."

Warren's 2009 painting, *Magic Mountain*, part of a series. His next show, While We Sleep, opens at his own magic mountain space, his wife's Les Yeux du Monde gallery, on October 6.

Warren's output varies—as many as a few large paintings per month. "Some days, he finishes one a day," says Lyn. One of her children tells Warren not to let anyone know how quickly he works, for fear of devaluing the art he creates: "You're painting too fast."

From Magic Mountain brought me to Warren's work. For viewers, the title describes the series' triangular heaps of images—stacks of skulls fractured by cubism, cattle horns and bolo ties, guitars and fruit, haphazardly piled before layered backgrounds of rock, air, water. In this series, you can see Warren's autobiography—Texas images taking the shape of Virginia's Blue Ridge, images he designed to resemble his horses and dog. They're titled "Buckets of Moonbeams" and "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Dreaming."

You can also see Warren's earnestness, his singular devotion to his themes and figures, the element that makes him timeless. The paintings embrace Warren's legacy rather than dodge it for fashion's sake. They show him as a figure big with history, like one of his *Mare* paintings, an artist grown large with the stories of his time and place, which we inhabit with him.

For Warren, *Magic Mountain* is a name for home. When he and Lyn married, he would drive from Virginia to North Carolina to teach; when he returned home, he knew he was close when he saw the Blue Ridge appear in the north. *Magic Mountain* also fits the couple's abode, a beautiful home abutted by a brick silo. When Les Yeux du Monde left its Downtown gallery space in 2008, the Warrens hired modern architect W.G. Clark to design a new gallery near their residence. The structure uses rusted steel to achieve feelings of permanence and grace, like a Richard Serra sculpture, and is one of the most beautiful buildings in the county.

Lyn Warren, owner of Les Yeux du Monde and a Ph.D. in art history, married Russ in 2005. Warren, she says, "is a great draftsman...the line is very important."

Magic Mountain also represents death. During a sabbatical in Mexico, Warren discovered magotés—burial sites where family members leave gifts and cherished objects for lost loved ones. "Every year, on the Day of the Dead, they go and take all these favors—drinks, food, clothing, records—and they bury them on these little mountains," says Warren. "And they grow every year." Recently, Warren's father died at age 88, from leukemia. He is drawing his way through his response, a process that will add more figures to his mountains.

For me, *Magic Mountain* is defiantly vital. During the year I spent with Warren, his paintings multiplied in the gallery. Dozens of 4' x 5' canvases filled his second-floor studio space—more piles of his history, images of family and animals and Texas and Virginia, all structure-bearing images, each one integral.

In May, I went to Richmond to see a Picasso exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The Warrens led a tour group of 15 through the show. In each room, Lyn offered art history context, and then Russ followed up with Picasso's abridged biography—which is no easy, or brief, feat.

"I'm going to try to keep Russ moving," said Lyn in one room, while other tour groups eclipsed our own.

"Don't move him along too fast," someone responded.

In front of a study for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, his proto-Cubist masterpiece, the couple talked about Picasso's appetite for new materials and lines, different figures and visions. *Demoiselles* projected Picasso's figures through a new lens, African art. At one point, Warren's modernist side showed strongly.

"He wants to go on, he wants to go on," said Warren. He sees Picasso as impatient with formal instruction, an artist capable of matching his contemporaries' precision and delicacy, but hungry for next steps and new conclusions.

As a child, I had nightmares about death. After, I needed to feel that figures like Dylan and Picasso and Keith Richards would last forever. (O.K., Richards probably will.) I still want Bob Dylan to rage, instead, like Dylan Thomas, against the dying of the light. I want significance to be undiminished. I want magic mountains to outlive their peers, to grow new rock, to amass new meaning. I want you to see what Russ Warren sees and creates, because if you don't, then I have no way to show you how vital we all should be, in what time we have.