

## The Art of Ressemblage

The “Swamp Rabbit Series” of Combined Assemblage and Realist Plein-Air Landscape.

Dr. David S. McCurry

I am happy to be included in this show with my good friend Georgia Harrison and all the other plein air painters in and around Greenville. As an artist who almost exclusively “draws from nature,” most of my work can be described as *plein-air* (or plain air) painting or drawing. As you can see, however, these pieces do not look like the more typical *plein-air* work one would see at an exhibit of this type of art, and some further description is necessary.

It is helpful to understand a bit about what plain air painting currently is and how it came to be. Artists have, perhaps forever, used direct visual observation to paint or draw what they could see. Throughout antiquity into the modern times, observation of nature, the human figure, and everything in the visual landscape served as a reference for making visual art. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, representational painting had achieved a very highly developed “polish,” institutionalized in academies and salons in Europe. The subject matter of much of this art tended to represent classical or biblical themes, often illustrating well-known stories or historical events and their principal actors. Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a great wave of desire for art that would give representation to the voice and vision of the “common people” swept across the western world. The Barbizon School painters (including Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Gustave Courbet and Jean-Francois Millet) gained recognition with their masterful depictions of peasant farmers and laborers, still-life and landscapes, subjects seldom seen in artwork from preceding centuries.

Around this same time, into the late 1800s, an important movement in the art world took shape. Painters started moving outdoors from the studio, supported with paints newly available in tubes and portable easels, and became intent on capturing impressions of light and color and movement in the landscape, relying less on studied exact markings on the canvas and more on quick and loose brushwork to achieve this effect. Impressionism, as the movement would come to be known, was informed also by the relatively new scientific knowledge in optics and visual sensory perception. Color theory (or the theory of how we see and perceive color in our visual field) became an important tool to the artist.

Today, many artists around the world take to the outdoors, painting “on location” in the plein air style. As you can see beautifully represented in the work in this exhibit, the traditions of impressionism and plein air painting are alive and well in the upstate and Greenville in particular.



In many ways my painting, especially the pieces exhibited here, is both within and at the same time an extension of the plein-air tradition. I begin with the central subject painting, which I approach in a more realistic fashion than most plein-air painters. My own style is greatly influenced by the work of the Spanish realist painter Antonio Lopez Garcia and his student Miguel Angel Argüello, who was my first teacher in California. This process requires much time, as I often paint in 2 to 3 hour periods at the same location, perhaps finishing a painting in 40 to 50 hours of work over several weeks. During this time, I become pretty fascinated with the location, wondering about the history, events and people who passed by or worked in the buildings I often choose as subjects. For this present work, my interest in the location extended to walking around the area, finding random bits of metal, plastic, wood, and glass. Each of these objects had a particular use or function, sometimes obviously connected to buildings in the scene I was painting, sometimes not so obvious.

I started researching various ways that artists in the past (and present) combined found objects with oil painting and this led me to re-examine work by Robert Rauschenberg, who developed a series of works termed “combines,” which extended largely abstract painting from two dimensional to three dimensional compositions using objects like clip-boards and in one case (“Monogram”) a stuffed goat. I also looked again at the work of collage and assemblage artists like Kurt Schwitters, Joseph Cornell and George Herms for inspiration. Nobody, that I could find, had experimented with realist painting and assemblage in quite this way. My intent here is not necessarily to make something aesthetically beautiful in a traditional sense, but to entice the viewer into considering the historical past, the present and perhaps the future of very specific locations in our immediate visual reach. For me, the Swamp Rabbit trail, and the project which drives the current development activity, embodies all of these characteristics. I hope you enjoy and find this work interesting.

In the first piece, “**Gospel Essentials**,” the central and initial interest came from the triangle of light and shadow on the pale blue wall. It is a familiar scene to anyone traveling along Poinsett Highway, going north, and is directly opposite the former Snapshot Café. Georgia Harrison and I first went to this site together. She produced a nice study in oil on that visit, and then later a wonderful piece in chalk pastel, while I took root at that location and worked on the painting over a couple of months in the summer of 2008. I met several interesting characters near this busy intersection. During one of my last painting sessions, I decided to walk around the empty lot and started collecting an interesting pile of found objects. One of these, which I had originally rejected and left lying on the ground, was the old yellow cassette audio tape cover. It kept coming back into my mind, and I returned after several days to find it. I had wondered what the tape recording was, and it proved to be “Gospel Essentials,” a collection of various artists singing music in that style. It holds no particular religious significance for me, but I thought it was amusing.

I had completed a painting of the old Scott Fertilizer plant on Roe Ford Rd. north of Furman University that previous fall and winter. I had sat right next to the Swamp Rabbit trail running through the middle of the plant buildings, and I decided then to develop another combination assemblage composition from that piece in what would become “**Fertile Ground**”.