

Finding a life among the trees

Painter Melissa Graves Brown has finally realized her dream. Text by Jennifer Tuohy

Melissa Graves Brown's studio, tucked into a nondescript corner of the bland Woodside Industrial Estate, is a breath of fresh air. Much like the woman herself.

A converted garage, the studio echoes with soothing jazz and is littered with the tools of an artist's trade. An overstuffed couch almost hides a children's play den, and the absence of any office paraphernalia lets the visitor know that this is where the real work gets done. Splendid large canvases dominate the space, hanging high on tall walls, lying scattered across the concrete floor or leaning on easels and milk crates.

Brown and her husband, Chris, moved to Hailey from Fort Meyers, Florida, in 1999. Until recently, Brown, who has a masters in Fine Art from the University of Pennsylvania, sustained her dream to become a "real painter" with employment at various local restaurants.

"I've been a waitress, pioneering the dream to live," she said with a laugh. "Much to my family's chagrin, I had this beautiful degree and I was waiting tables, but I knew there was more."

Now, dressed in the prerequisite artist's uniform—paint splattered tennis shoes, comfy corduroys and, a nod to her Idaho home, a well-worn fleece—Brown is proud to call herself a professional artist.

"In the past year things have really taken off. I walked away from employment. I said to myself, 'I know I can do this.'"

And she has. Represented by two galleries—Wild Hands in Jackson, Wyoming, and a gallery in California—Brown can hardly keep up with the demand for her work. This summer she will show her work locally at both the Sun Valley Center Arts & Crafts Festival and St. Luke's lobby gallery, south of Ketchum.

This will be her debut at the prestigious Sun Valley Center Arts & Crafts Festival, and she puts it all down to her redoubled efforts to be a profitable artist.

"This is the first time I've been in the show. I finally got my act together. I've been wanting to pursue it for years, of course. But, I think this time I was ready. Things don't necessarily come

your way until you're ready. I think when you put out that vibe that you're taking yourself seriously others do, too."

Brown's fast-blooming success will come as no surprise to those familiar with her work. Whether you've admired them whilst sipping a microbrew at Freshies, munching a baguette at Bigwood Bakery or strolling the halls of St. Luke's, Brown's nature inspired, color saturated paintings are impressive.

Working with acrylics ("when you have two young children you appreciate paint that dries quickly"), Brown paints trees almost exclusively. "My grad school mates would laugh at me! I was this big abstract color field painter. But my father always use to say that organized religion was the wind in the trees, and it never made sense to me until recently.

"I don't know how to articulate why I paint the trees, outside of just loving it. It's not really what you paint; it's how you paint. To be able to push space with color has been a challenge for sure. My subject is color, pushed into a landscape."

Color is the dominant element in Brown's large (up to 5 by 8 foot) canvases. Some have a dark, intense feel, others reveal a lighter, more whimsical tone.

"I think of color first," she said. "I think, 'This will be a red painting, or this will be a blue painting.' My red series was inspired by that Fisher Creek burn up north of Ketchum. Although they're dark stalks, they glow because of that char. The new growth up there is so vibrant. Really inspiring."

Brown works from her mind's eye, never from photographs, and planning is not part of her creative process. "I don't do sketches or prepare. I just get a canvas and go."

While her work spurs viewers to go out and enjoy the beauty of nature, it is Brown's story that is the true inspiration. If you believe in yourself, if you follow your heart—putting in a lot of hard work along the way—you can realize your dream.

"Every day I wake up, and I still can't believe that I get to paint, and I don't have to go to work tonight."



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