

Contributed by
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A Sense of Place

Artist Monika Teal paints with an awareness of where she is, but never forgets where she came from.

A sense of place is important to artist Monika Teal. Brought up in a small farming community in the American South, she has always been interested in the way landscape and culture shapes people. That is partly due to the fact that hers was not the typical small town family. Her parents, who met and fell in love in post-World War II Germany, were from vastly different backgrounds: her father was the son of a blacksmith serving as an American soldier and her mother was an East German aristocrat whose privileged lifestyle was destroyed by the war. Growing up, Teal was taught by her father to love the land and the place where her roots are; at the same time her mother taught her there was more to the world than what could be experienced in the farm land of North Carolina. She remembers standing in the sand at Myrtle Beach, looking out across the Atlantic and thinking, "I've got family over there. A part of me belongs over there."

Teal often felt different as a child and spent a lot of time reading stories—Uncle Remus, Grimm's fairy tales and Aesop's fables. And, she painted. She knew exactly what she wanted to do when she grew up: she wanted to paint and travel.

And, that's exactly what she has done. She considers herself fortunate to have always found a way to make a living doing art and traveling. Besides numerous places in the United States, her painting has taken her to Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Hungary and Cuba. In 2002, she was invited by the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba to be the first U.S. woman painter to participate in a residency in eastern Cuba and also became the first U.S. woman painter to have an exhibition at Galerie Oriente in Santiago de Cuba. She is impressed with the Cuban approach to art. "Art is so alive there. People don't have much in the way of material goods, but art is everywhere. If paint-

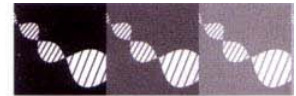


Monika Teal

ers don't have canvases, they paint on clothes, tabletops, walls—anything they can."

Teal, who is a Swiss-U.S. dual citizen, credits her move to Switzerland as one of the most dramatic influences on her work. The distinctive sense of place she gets in Switzerland is reflected in her art. Switzerland, of course, has a unique natural landscape, which inspires Teal differently than other places. The psychological impact of being a foreigner in a land and culture that is in many ways much different than the one she grew up in adds depth and emotion to her painting. And, the inspiration available to her as an artist in a place with a rich history of art has also influenced her work.

In her studio in Solothurn, Teal still paints the allegories she learned reading fables as a child. Animals are significant in Teal's paintings. "The tension between animal and human and how they relate intrigues me. We celebrate and condemn the wild and instinctual. I am always searching for new ways to develop my ideas and retell stories, never satisfied with staying with a story line or references." Take, for instance, her painting of Red Riding Hood in which the wolf is not the big, bad wolf from the original story line, but a guardian wolf. "Animals are nev-



personality

er a symbol of evil in my paintings."

A quality that is seen throughout her art is an idea that Teal refers to as "womanicity." Her paintings tend to be inwardly focused and often depict womanly themes such as connection to the earth, connection to animal life, and free expression of emotion in ways that push the boundaries of what we are used to seeing.

With a hint of a soft southern drawl, you can still hear Carolina in her voice, but Monika Teal has come a long way from the tobacco fields back home. She has traveled the world, always taking time to become acquainted with her "sense of place" and paint it into her art. While in Switzerland, she wants to deepen her sense of place and put down some roots by getting in touch with other expat artists in and around Bern and help foster a supportive community for each other's work.

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