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GIBBES MUSEUM OF ART Volume 13



artists among us

JILL HOOPER

ALFRED HUTTY'S STUDIO
IN THE GARDEN

ART TO GO

ARTIST PROFILE

JILL HOOPER

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Tucked above the daytime bustle of Broad Street, up a non-descript set of stairs, one finds Jill Hooper's studio. With windows flung open to welcome the beautiful northern light, the sounds of downtown Charleston are ever present, yet seem far away, as if you have been transported to a different time and place altogether. Both Hooper and her artwork have this effect—the feeling you have slipped into the Old World yet remain in touch with the contemporary. Her work has a delightfully anachronistic charm, but also a great deal of substance and intellectual rigor that goes into each painting.

Much of Hooper's Old World vibe comes from her approach to painting. Throughout her career, she has trained with a number of renowned realist painters, including D. Jeffrey Mims, Charles Cecil, and Ben Long. Her classical training has instilled a strong work ethic and careful attention to materials. Hooper is a purist who takes no shortcuts in her preparation or working method. She mixes her own pigments and paints from life with natural, northern light. Models sit for hours at a time in her studio, carefully posed by Hooper and then sketched by her sure hand. The day of my visit, we were joined by Lucy, who regularly sits for Hooper. The easy exchange between model and artist demonstrated the mutual respect of their collaborative relationship. Life drawing is absolutely essential to Hooper's process, and she is adept at building comfort and trust with her models, enabling their poses to give shape to her artistic conceptions. The authenticity of Hooper's working process carries through in the finished work, lending an honesty and intimacy that can only come from painting from life.

This winter, the Gibbes is showcasing Hooper's work with a one-person exhibition entitled *Jill Hooper: Contemporary Realist*. The exhibition includes a number of her beautifully-rendered, psychologically-gripping



portraits for which she has earned international acclaim. Among them is *Pugnis et Calcibus*, a 2006 self-portrait depicting Hooper in a dark moment of personal struggle. The painting earned the prestigious BP Portrait Award and also marked a significant shift in Hooper's subject matter. Many of the portraits in the Gibbes exhibition revolve around themes of personal struggle and resilience. Hooper explains that these paintings portray "the quiet, difficult moments that eventually lead to an upward spiral." Capturing such moments can be difficult, but Hooper does so with great facility, conveying powerful emotion with each painting.

To offer more insight into Hooper's working process, the exhibition includes preparatory drawings installed next to the finished paintings. The drawings show the journey to the finished product including changes and artistic decisions made along the way. They provide a glimpse into Hooper's thought process, yet stand as beautiful works of art in their own right. Hooper's studio is full of such drawings of figures, hands, and other anatomical studies—all evidence of how hard she works to perfect her craft.

And even though she has met great success early in her career, Hooper is not one to rest on her laurels. She is constantly pushing and exploring, working to move her art to the next level. One senses a bit of restlessness





within Hooper, but this is a good thing. It is the type of restlessness that drives greatness; complacency is not a part of her persona. Along these lines, the Gibbes exhibition includes several new paintings that take a bold step in expanding her body of work. The new works tackle ambitious subject matter and compositions with impressive results. Hooper is not content to simply paint a beautiful face—which she certainly is capable of doing—but aims to create paintings with real substance behind the brushwork.

As impressive as her work may be, Hooper herself is even more impressive. She is a generous soul whose contributions to the Gibbes go way beyond her paintings on the gallery walls. Hooper volunteers her time as a docent, leading tours of the Gibbes permanent collection, and also organizes programming for Society 1858, the museum's auxiliary group for young professionals. Her passion for art is infectious, and her presence is inspiring. And lucky for us, she has a long career ahead of her.

Jill Hooper: Contemporary Realist will be on view January 20–April 22, 2012. To learn more about Hooper, please visit annlongfineart.com. Visit the Calendar pages of this issue of *Signature* for special events related to the exhibition.

