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Life in the Lowcountry

*Experience its inherent riches—
natural beauty, native talent,
& centuries of history*

Lapis, oil on canvas, by Jill Hooper

USA \$4.95

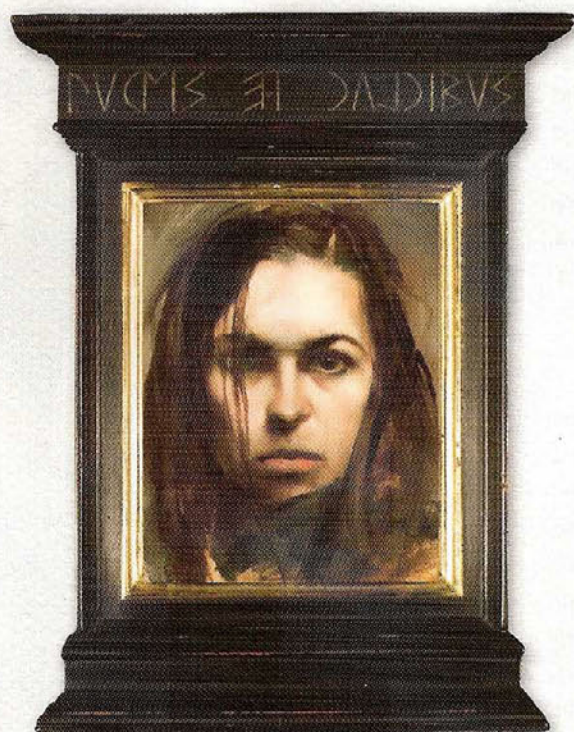


Inside: Classical realist painter Jill Hooper, Special Collections at the College of Charleston, one woman's eye-opening journey in Saudi Arabia, fall fashions, & the sixth annual Charitable Events Calendar



"I want humanity and that breath of life in whatever I do," says artist Jill Hooper, who explored new realms in her award-winning self-portrait Pugnus et Calcibus (oil on wooden board, 10 x 8 inches, opposite page). "People see that painting and tell me they've been there before, they identify with it. People connect when they see something real. It makes life not seem so lonely." This page: Cordelia, oil on linen, 60 x 70 inches

ARTWORK COURTESY OF ANN LONG FINE ART & JILL HOOPER



DEPTH PERCEPTION

Building on years of classical training, artist

Jill Hooper

delves into new territory—exploring the palette and patina of the human psyche

Written by STEPHANIE HUNT 🌹 Photographs by TIM HUSSEY

This was definitely not a typical Sunday afternoon in Charleston. Despite the droopy late summer heat and the general languidness of that most languid of days, things were buzzing down on Bee Street. A handful of fledgling artists were relaxing on a piazza, getting ready for the final session of a weekend figure-drawing intensive. Inside in the kitchen, Jill Hooper was stirring the pot.

"Here, look," she says, peering enthusiastically into a pitch-dark soup. "I'm teaching them how to make ink. From soot," she says, as if cooking soot, scraped straight from the chimney, was as normal as cooking collards on a Sunday afternoon. "See the different tones," she asks, dipping her finger into the pot then swiping it on paper, leaving an elegant gray-black wash. "This one's a walnut bistre, from France," says Hooper, enthusiastically dabbing a smudge of rich brown-black pigment onto the paper. A small wooden box holds miniscule jars of the walnut, Languedoc, and miscellaneous bistres (including a 2002 birchwood vintage)—all concoctions distilled from the same ancient



From mixing pigments to sizing paper with homemade rabbit-hide glue, Hooper uses ancient techniques in the old master tradition.

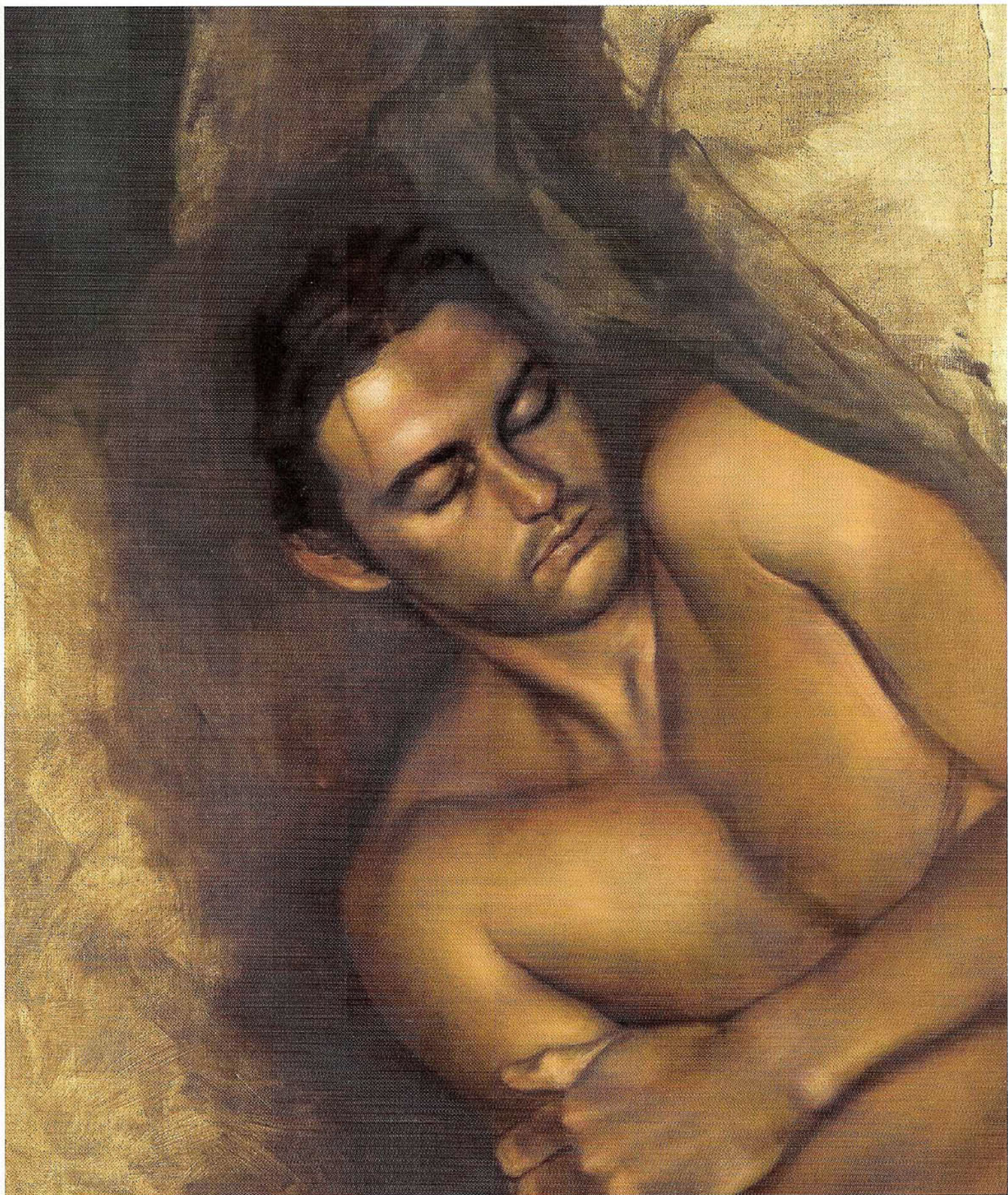


A studio bookshelf, laden with treasures and props that inspire Jill's still life compositions, looks like it dropped out of a Dickens novel.

techniques used by Rembrandt and Velázquez. She samples them on paper as a vintner would his finest wines, pointing out their subtle hue variations like a true connoisseur.

As the workshop students trickle back after their lunch break, we walk up to her second-floor studio, past a stairwell gallery of century-old etchings and drawings and portraits by Hooper and her friends and teachers. At the top of the stairs, the large, creaky studio with draped windows, double fireplaces, and a tall ceiling runs the

entire northern side of this early-19th-century Victorian where the artist lives. Today, it's a jumble of easels and stools; books on anatomy and the human figure lie about for ready reference; a skeleton dangles at the front corner; several busts, vases, and old bottles of varying height and shape (props for still lifes, which she does exclusively in this studio) clutter the tops of the bookcases; a small Venetian table is strewn with charcoal, erasers, and a half-filled water bottle. Pavarotti arias play in the background.



Endymion, oil on linen, 20 x 24 inches



Jill paints exclusively using natural northern light and live models, who sit for hours at a time at her Broad Street studio. The resulting portraits, Hooper says, reflect a quiet intimacy.

And at the front of the room, on a raised, lighted platform, is Eric, a gorgeous nude model, here to offer the human figure in all its supple glory. Hooper choreographs the scene, assisting Eric into a comfortable, just-right position for the long posing session. She turns him, adjusts his arms and feet, suggests a slight twist of his well-defined trunk, and stands back. "Perfect!" she says. "See the grace and curve here," pointing to where his abs meet his iliac crest. "You want something slightly off balance, *contraposto*, with variation in the feet. This is great, very classical, very French academic."

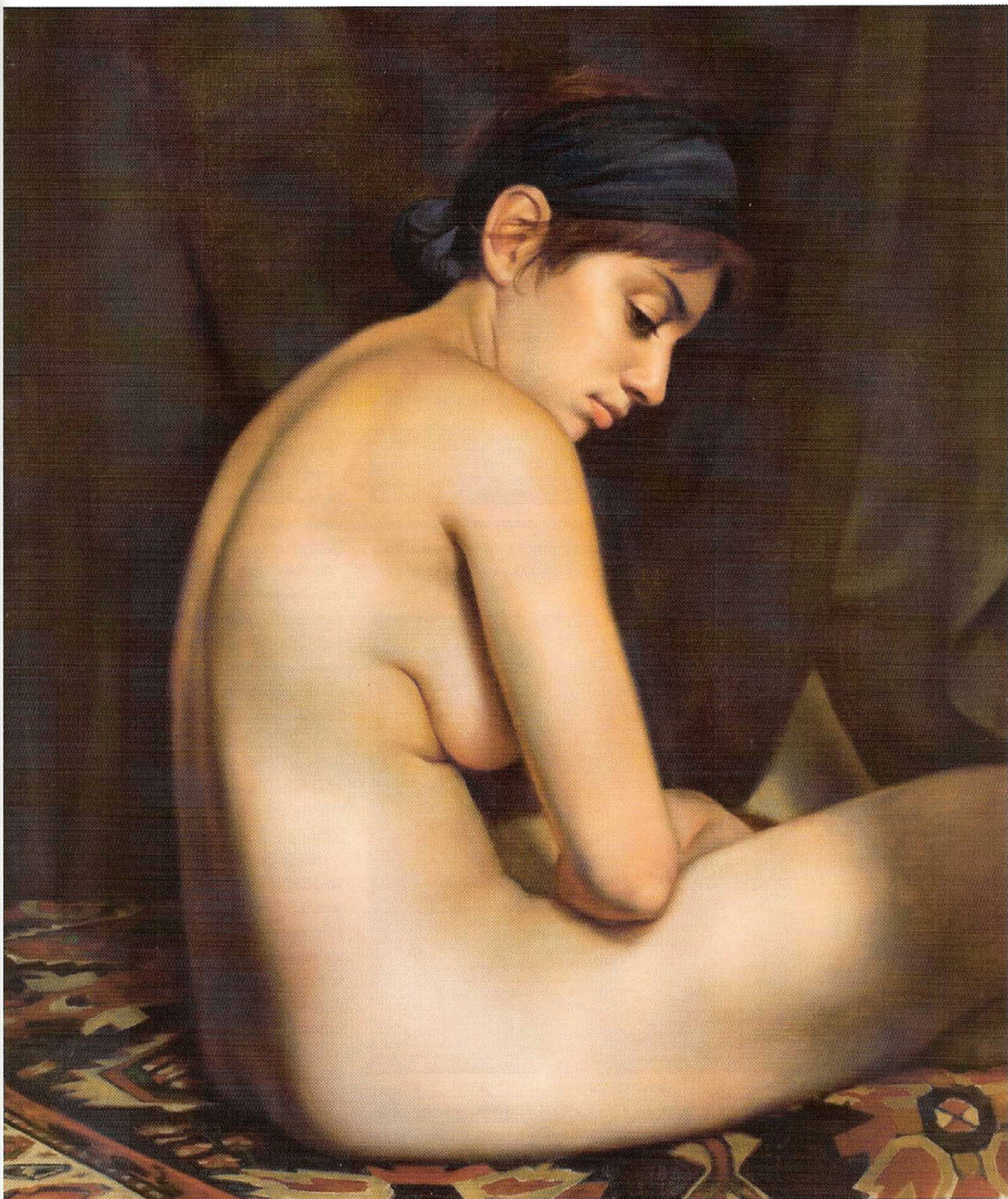
SEVEN-AND-A-HALF HEADS

Jill Hooper gracefully occupies two worlds. She's fresh, young, and hip, the epitome of contemporary with an unpretentious hint of artsy—her hair held back with a rolled scarf haloing her face as if she walked out of a Vermeer painting—and yet she's unabashedly old-school. Hooper is artistically rooted in the classical tradition. Straight up, no short cuts. She's a purist about her materials—paper sized with home-brewed rabbit hide glue; her light—natural, northern sunlight only (the spotlight on Eric an exception for this class); her models—

real people who sit for hours at a time, no working from photographs; and her work ethic—determined and unrelenting.

"I've been drawing since I was five. It's the only thing I was ever good at," says Hooper, who is the youngest living artist to have a piece in the Gibbes Museum of Art's permanent collection. "There was never any question that I'd be an artist. My parents were very supportive." Born in upstate New York, Hooper and her family moved to Southern Pines, North Carolina, when she was 11, and there she met her first teacher, D. Jeffrey Mims. The classical painter and muralist didn't have a formal school at the time and wasn't accepting students, but he let Hooper hang around his studio and do minor assistance on a mural commission. "I was 15 years old, and it was an amazing opportunity," says Hooper. "Jeffrey became my mentor. Just being around that caliber

"There was never any question that I'd be an artist.... It was the only thing I was ever good at." Jill Hooper



Marina, oil on linen, 28 x 24 inches



Capturing the changing colors of a rosemary twig wilting (Rosemary and Shallots, oil on linen, 8 x 8 inches, above) or meat aging (Still Life of Prosciutto, oil on linen, 19 x 24 inches, below) is the challenge of still life, but Hooper prefers the natural patina of a decaying composition.



"Jill is dedicated. She's always learning, always pushing the limits of what her medium can do."

Angela Mack, executive director, Gibbes Museum of Art

of work was formative for me."

As a studio art major at the College of Charleston, Hooper explored various techniques and painting styles but always gravitated back to the classical, European, beaux arts realm of the human figure, still life, and landscapes. "It rang true to me and seemed a natural path. It just made sense," she says. After studying in France and Italy during college, Hooper returned to North Carolina to apprentice more intently with Mims. There, she met fellow painter Kamille Corry, who has been a close artistic colleague and friend for the last 18 years. The two have traveled to Utah and London for extended five-month work trips and have studied in Florence, Italy, with Mims. Both artists are currently represented by Ann Long Fine Art in Charleston, where they had a joint exhibit in 2006.

"Jill has a wonderful sense of humor, and she's great to travel and work with," says Corry, who has sat as a portrait subject for Hooper numerous times, and vice versa. "We learn from each other's experiences, share philosophies, talk openly about our fears and insecurities as artists, and support each other through some really great high points and achievements. When we were in the desert painting, Jill used to always leave her palette on the top of my car, and we'd drive off, then turn around seconds later to try to find it. Somehow we always did," Corry adds. "If you ever find a wooden palette loaded with wet paint in the middle of a Charleston street, it's probably Jill's."

Palette-recovery missions aside, Hooper's immersion in the artistic philosophy and techniques of the old masters has been a long and continual process. In addition to apprenticing with Mims, Hooper spent a year at the renowned Florence studio of Charles Cecil, a pioneer in reviving the 19th-century Parisian atelier method that emphasizes "sight-size" technique, a "philosophy of seeing" that entails viewing the image as a whole and rendering it in correct scale and proportion on the canvas. When Hooper teaches her workshop students to hold a plumb line beside their paper, cycling Eric the model against the line's bearings, she is



Hooper enjoys breaking up the solitary intensity of portrait and still life painting with outdoor excursions with friends, including John Hayes, to paint landscapes.

using Cecil's sight-size method. "Seven-and-a-half heads," she reminds one of her students as she critiques an "Eric" sketch. "That's the proportion of Leonardo's man: seven-and-a-half heads from top of head to foot."

CONTINUING ED

On numerous return trips to Italy, Hooper has continued to glean wisdom and hone her technique working with Cecil and attending his lectures. In fact, Florence has become home away from home. Hooper tries to return annually for months at a time to paint, study, and indulge in Italy's aesthetic wonderland. She rents a studio from friends and gorges on the readily accessible inspiration found at the Uffizi, the Pitti Palace's Galleria D'Arte Moderna (modern in

this context meaning 19th century—she especially loves the Macchiaioli painters), and the endless bounty of churches. "I find something new every time," says Hooper, whose latest discovery was the church of Santa Felicita right off the Ponte Vecchio.

And she has worked and taught in Florence and Charleston with fresco master and fellow classical painter Ben Long, whose Charleston studio used to be right across the hall from Hooper's. "That was great, especially when I ran out of linseed oil," she says. Hooper first met Long when she was an impressionable 15 years old and easily intimidated by his formidable stature, but over the last few years, Long has become her influential mentor and friend. "It's like when you're playing tennis

with someone who's better than you—it pushes you," she says. "Ben is a really generous soul. He's a complex man who challenges life, and watching him live and draw deepens my understanding."

"Jill is the only young painter that I know who has had the privilege of studying with or apprenticing herself to three important teachers—Mims, Cecil, and Long," says gallery owner Ann Long, who also represents Ben Long (no relation). "She knows that she has to be constantly seeking information from others as part of her ongoing education. It takes a great deal of knowledge to draw anatomy correctly and paint flesh tones realistically," Long adds. "Jill has a great work ethic, and besides that, she's humble and generous beyond compare."



There's no hiding when painting a self-portrait. Blackbird (oil on linen, 16 x 9 inches) reflects the same honest scrutiny that Hooper strives to bring to all of her portraits.

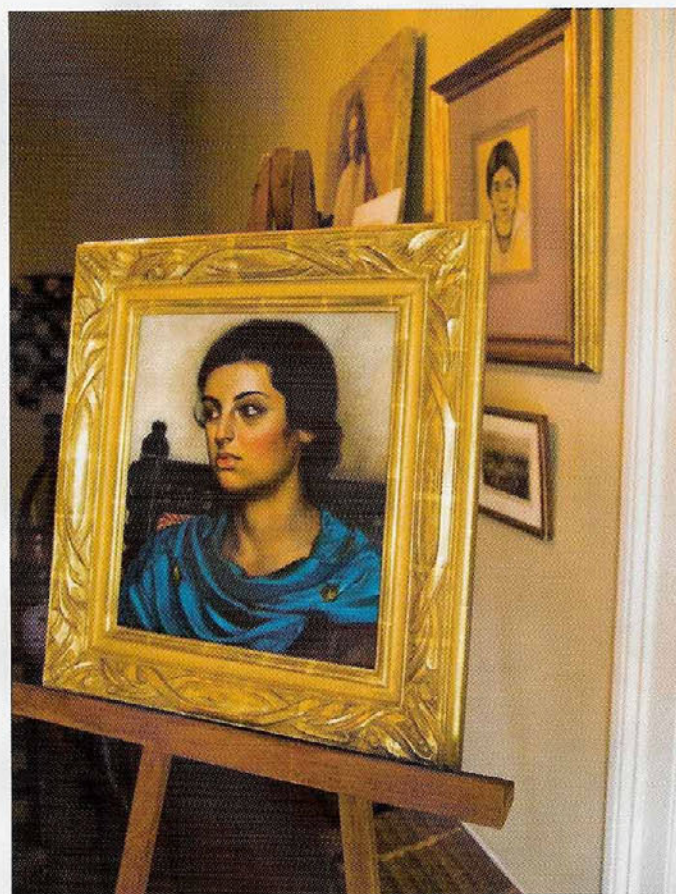
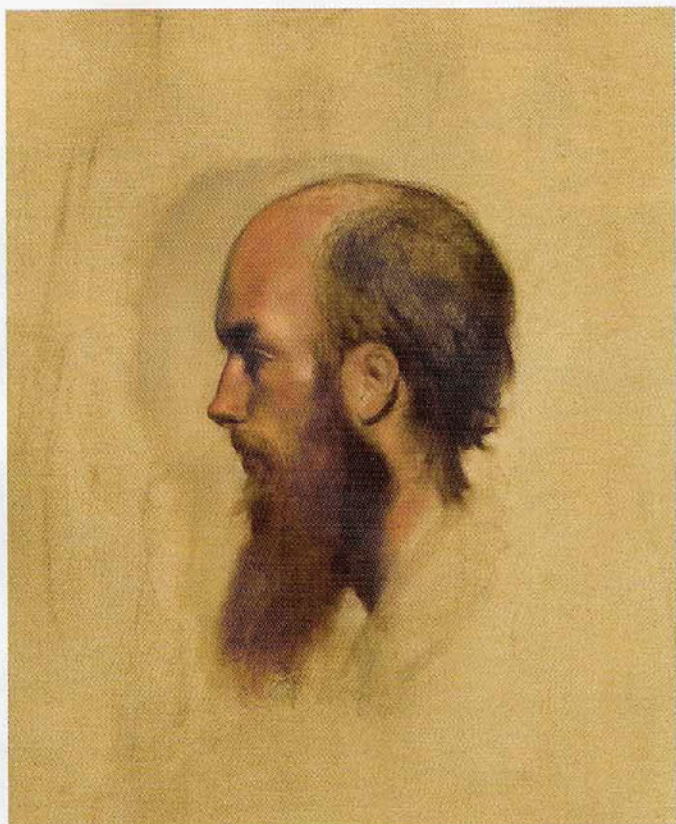
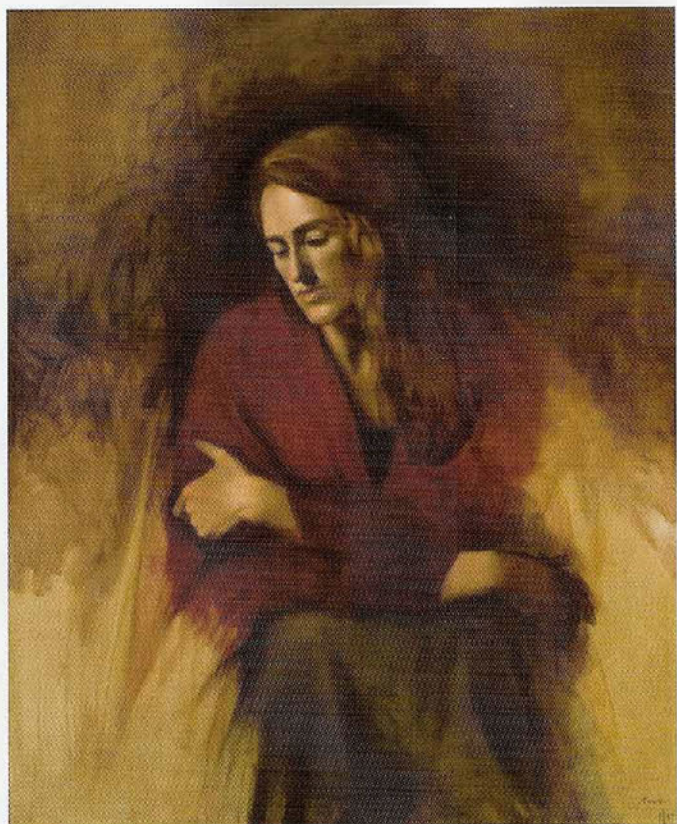
According to Angela Mack, executive director of the Gibbes Museum of Art, classical training is not necessarily still considered a prerequisite for an artist ("whether or not it should be is an interesting question," she says), but Mack is clear about her bias. "I don't believe great artists are just born great artists," she says. "It's a skill acquired from many, many years of devotion. It requires learning, learning, learning, practice, practice, practice. Jill is dedicated. She's always learning, always pushing the limits of what her medium can do. To me, that says it all right there."

RENAISSANCE IN RAW

Years of draftsmanship; drawing daily from plaster casts and models; training her eye to perceive proportion, detail, and the tricky play of light; mastering the materials and media; stalking the museums and churches of Europe—all these disciplines, practices, and passions are now deeply rooted in Hooper's artistic vernacular and embedded in her being. And they are emerging on her canvas in new and explosive ways.

"I'm finding a transition in my subject matter," says Hooper, her eyes intense and searching. She points out several large canvases, in various stages of completion, that are propped along the walls and easels of her other studio, a tucked-away Broad Street third-floor room with tall, north-facing windows that make it ideal for figure and portrait painting. ("The light in here is brilliant to work with," she notes.) One canvas depicts the moody, shadowy eyes of a Croatian lawyer friend she met in Florence; another is of a woman, naked and vulnerable, stripped of trappings but possessing a quiet, hopeful fortitude. All of them are evocative, introspective; all convey a refined, hushed eloquence.

"We're always intrigued by a beautiful face or big eyes, but I've done that now so many times, it's time to grow a bit," Hooper explains. "I'm more interested now in having content in the subject and meaning behind it. I'm intrigued by the psychology behind the portrait. When you're sitting



Clockwise from top left: Kamille, oil on linen, 39 x 32 inches; Jamie, oil on panel, 14 x 10 inches; Zainab, oil on linen, 16 x 14 inches; Lapis, oil on linen, 38 x 29 inches



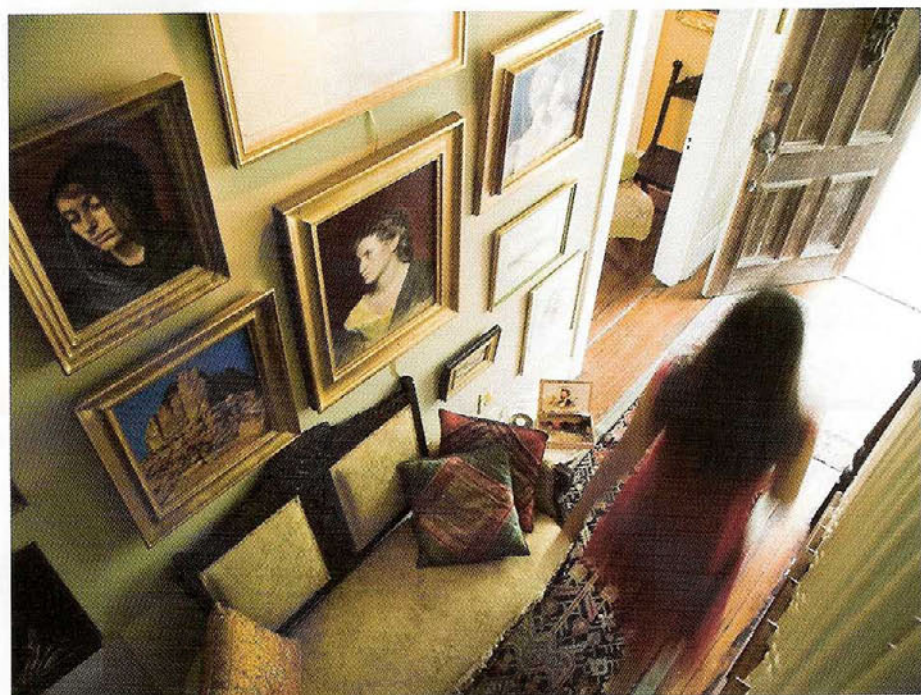
Plein air painting takes the versatile artist into the field. Hooper has captured scenes from Utah's deserts to Italy's landscapes to the Lowcountry's marshes.

there with someone quietly, the more you respect and know them, the greater the portrait can be. It's a pretty intimate thing, a rare occasion to sit with someone and not talk, just observe," she adds. "What goes through my eye gets expressed through my hand."

Hooper doesn't shield herself from this same scrutiny—this sense of edgy honesty and reflective exploration. In fact, her self-portraits are among the most revealing and emotionally powerful of her recent works. Of particular note is a small portrait that gained international acclaim last year as a winner of the prestigious BP Portrait Award. Titled *Pugnus et Calcibus* ("with fists and heels"), the portrait is brooding and disarming, a distillation of turmoil at an unsettling juncture in the artist's personal and professional journey. "This was the turning point," Hooper says of her self-portrait, which hung in the National Portrait Gallery in London and toured museums across the United Kingdom. "Sometimes it's a really dark moment that gives you clarity."

This clarity seems to be fueling a work pace that is perhaps even more grueling than usual. Models come to her Broad Street studio for two-hour sittings; still lifes set up at her Bee Street home studio ripen and decompose until the painting is done, and the resulting work reflects a slight yellowing, her signature patina of imperfection in all its natural beauty. Many of Hooper's works in progress touch on themes of rebirth and reinvention, mirroring her own evolution and renaissance as a classical realist, with a newfound emphasis on "real." "I believe that, to live an honest life, you constantly have to restart," she says. "With each painting, I'm pushing myself to make it honest and raw and meaningful. That's where the art lies. That's where something lasting is. That's the trick."

The trick seems to be working. Art collectors are onto her, and Hooper has been offered a solo exhibit at the Greenville County Museum of Art—a coup for any artist, particularly one so young. But the acclaim doesn't surprise Hooper's fans. "Her work is truthful; it's visceral, almost like

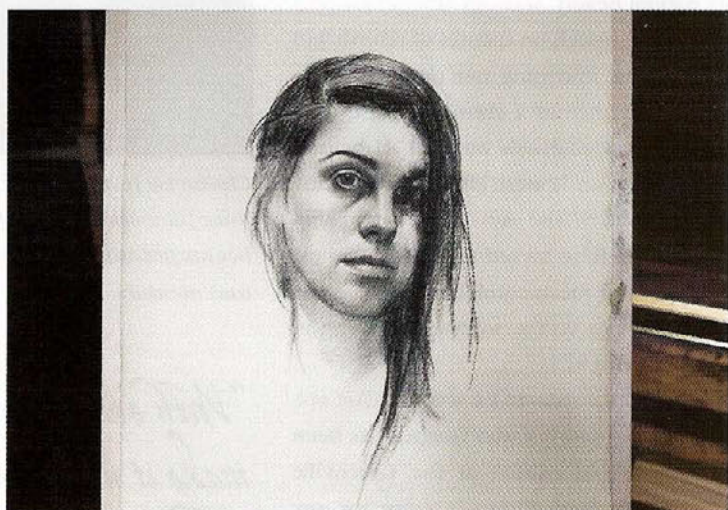


Clockwise from top left: Bistres made from soot have subtle variations in hue and tone; Jill works out compositional nuances in various sketches and studies before she begins painting; her home is a grand gallery, featuring inspiring works from friends and mentors.

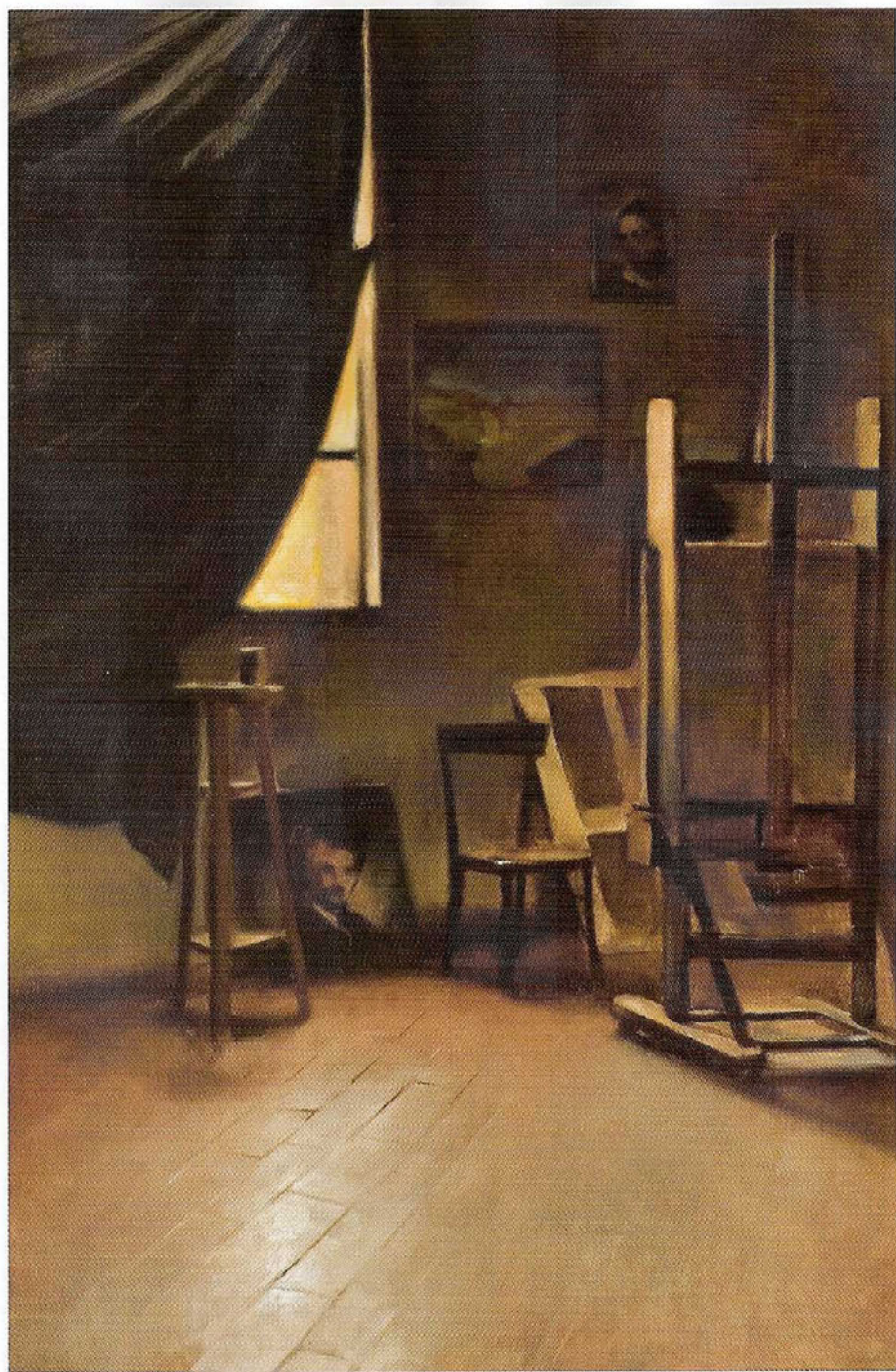
"With each painting, I'm pushing to make it honest and raw and meaningful. That's where the art lies." Jill Hooper



"I like painting people in their intimate space. I spend so much time alone that I really respond to that," says Hooper, whose figurative work begins with drawings and reflects years of studying the human anatomy.



"Making something look twee is easy," the artist notes. "To give it meaning takes a lot more time. Less is often more; I like leaving something to the imagination."



A still life of an artist's studio, Studio at Piazzale Donatello (oil on panel, 15 x 10 inches) represents the creative opening, says Hooper, the small space where the light peeks through and expression finds release. Right: Alfred, oil on linen, 12 x 9 inches



divine intervention," says Tom Marano, a New York art collector who met Hooper and discovered her work when he visited Ann Long Fine Art a few years ago. "If I don't feel an artist's soul through the painting, then I don't want anything to do with it. Jill is as soulful and as loving as they come." Ben Long agrees: "Jill has this effervescence, a natural grace that shows through in her work. She's an extremely hard worker who loves what she does. She puts her whole self into it, and that really comes through."

As our interview winds down, Hooper asks if I've ever sat for an artist before. "No," I reply, squirming a bit. "I've been checking out your nose—you've got a really cute nose," she says. "Why don't you sit for 15 minutes, and I'll draw, and we'll just see what comes of it." And so I sit quietly, my "cute nose" turned at an angle toward an unfinished canvas, a male nude, in the corner. I'm checking it out as she's checking me out, her swift, careful eyes bouncing back and forth from me to her paper, her eyebrows (with what Corry calls their "somewhat deceitful arch, so contradictory to her heart") doing small gymnastics.

The tables are turned. The profiler sits in profile. My subject is no longer talking about her work or when she had her first show (1994) or what she listens to when she's painting (model's choice or NPR). She's looking, fast and hard, and drawing, with hand movements so quick and sure I can hardly see her arm moving.

And here, in the silence, under her penetrating, warm gaze, I get the picture. ●

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