

found that using fewer colors really helps me focus my attention on establishing the big shapes and the important value changes, like the curves of a shape moving away from you." That focus on value (which essentially is the lights and darks of a painting), MacPhail says, strengthens the painting by giving it a road map of sorts. Getting the color of the actual object correct—whether it is perfectly true to life—is secondary to those relationships between light and dark, the tones that give shape and form to a painting, or what MacPhail compares to the old chiaroscuro that the old masters used.

MacPhail's style is also characterized by where she is and what she's doing in life. Although she's found commercial success as a painter, her work and home life are very much plaited together. "When my children were younger," she says, "family vacations motivated me. We spend so much time looking after our children, on the beach, chasing the dog, and those observations—they were my life." The resulting paintings of figures in landscapes are colorful—deceptively so, considering how much MacPhail limits her palette—and joyous. When she captures two young boys making sandcastles on the beach, you see not only frothy waves or the movements of one boy carefully shaping wet sand in a bucket, you see the joy and wonder in their motions as they build the first blocks of a masterpiece.

Of course, painting en plein air, as clouds drift by and leaves float off trees, means that MacPhail has to paint quickly. A single work, she says, "takes me 30 years, because



HALCYON FARM

that's how long I've been painting," but the actual time she might spend in front of her easel in a field or near a cliff might only be about three or four hours. She compares it to the Olympics: "It's hard to imagine somebody practicing for four years for a 15-second race, but as an artist, you also invest a lot." Although she does return to paintings in her studio, finishing or adding details, she finds that her paintings suffer if she spends too much time on them.

Occasionally, perhaps on a gray and rainy day, MacPhail will still set up a still life or work from models or photographs. When she lived in Winnetka, she painted a series of Cubs games, capturing the detail and

exuberance of the friendly confines. "It was a big part of my life at the time," she says, "and you should paint what you know."

Although many of her recent paintings are more obviously East Coast than Midwest, MacPhail insists that she couldn't have found her level of success or fulfillment had it not been for her 14 years in Winnetka. "A lot of the artistic process is the nurturing you get to keep going. I got that from the North Shore. I miss it terribly."

*Lark MacPhail is represented by two North Shore galleries, Master Touch Gallery in Northbrook and Jan Marion Gallery in Glenview. □*



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