



When the Queen Goes Out, I Like to Soak My Feet, 2005, Sheila Miles, Oil on Canvas, 24" x 18"

SHEILA

MILES

An interview with the artist

Where were you born? Tell us about your childhood: I was born in Indianapolis, in the early 1950s in a family of six children. We were middle class, so we started working to earn money when we were each ten. I was a tomboy and now that I look back, spent a long time lost in my imagination. You might think of it as daydreaming. I wandered a lot on my own and collected

every living thing I could find. I caught snakes, mice, toadstools, and even leeches from the creek. I tried to feed them and study them. I even had a bat in a jar for a while (long enough to take it to show and tell. Poor thing, I think I let him go just in time.) I think because my household was so noisy that I did anything I could to leave the house. I was in the Girl Scouts, played the flute, was in athletics, and was always making things. I decided to be an artist when I was about 9. In Indiana, if you could draw a horse, a barn, or a cow you were an artist! But my mother gave me a book on Gauguin and I decided I wanted to be "that kind of an artist". (Doing more creative or imaginative things.) My mother was creative; she made all my clothes and knitted our sweaters. She also earned extra money teaching ceramics in our home and we had a kiln in the garage. I drew all the time. My parents bought me good materials, real art paper, and drawing pencils. I also got scholarships for the summer to study at the John Herron Art Institute. I drew all the time. I wanted a horse and couldn't afford one so I drew them constantly. I saved money to rent horses to ride. I even broke a mule when I was 14 so I could ride him. I could draw about anything realistically by the time I was 14. Note: Anyone can learn the concepts to do realism in about a half hour. This does not mean it is art. (Because the more realistic something is, it may not be very personal (creative, imaginative, or unique.)

As an art teacher, what is important for children to understand about looking at artist's work?

I think a strong work of art transports the viewer into that world. It's like going to another country. We don't travel to say, Italy, to eat at a McDonald's. We go there to try their food, look in their shops, look at their buildings, etc. Many people and students think art is so subjective but actually, the success of art for a viewer is measured by the psychology of the viewer. (Note: the artist is the first viewer.) For instance, blue is the most popular color in the United States. Orange is the least favorite color. If the artist uses blue in their painting there is a better chance it will appeal to the viewer. Red stimulates and excited the viewer. Diagonal lines are "active" and therefore a more energetic painting has diagonal lines in it. These ideas are called the Principles of Art and Design.

Where and what were you doing in 2005 to produce this piece? In 2005, after living in Montana for 26 years, I moved to the California Coast and was living in a cabin in the redwoods. My partner was engineering a property (outfitting the house, ordering equipment, working with contractors, etc.) for a very wealthy man. We also did many other things for him to manage his property and for him, like opening his mail, taking care of his business, shopping and cooking for him. We were pretty much “on-call” for 24 hours a day. When we would leave the house (yes, I turned him onto the Queen) we would relax. We (the monkey) might soak his sore feet. Overall it is a cheerful piece. It even won first prize in an art contest. I think the popularity might be from its silliness like the monkey washing his feet, but I think the colors are also clear and some of the shapes and objects, of the tree for instance, are almost cartoon-like. For 35 years I made work without any preconceived ideas. I would start by just making marks. I worked in the style of surrealism which is “dream imagery”. The Surrealists believed what an artist makes “automatically”, rather than preconceiving (i.e. “I am going to do a picture of a dog”), is more genuine. In my work, I might start my art session by painting a horse, but if I saw it flying in the clouds I would add that. Then I might see marks in my painting that looked like another thing and I would paint that.

What were your goals when you painted this story? My goal when I make art is to make a discovery about the world and/or myself. When I did this work I was not making it to make any statement or an art idea, I was just trying to uncover how I saw, felt, or experienced the world. In society, we are taught to push everything down. We go to school or go to work or walk around in the world sometimes censoring our thoughts or feelings. Art can be a safe and genuine way to uncover the truth.

Is there a metaphor message in this piece? This piece might be a metaphor for “whatever happens in your life, try to keep a sense of humor.”