True to Still Life

Having long ago won over New York critics, artist Mary Ann Currier woos her hometown with a new show at the Speed. By Joyce Lynn

"What I'm seeing is so great — why should I change it? Why should I make it different?" asks internationally known still-life painter/pastel artist Mary Ann Currier. "It is presenting itself as perfect as it is, and what I see is the perfection I want." Her voice rises almost like a preacher's. "To think my imagination is going to get it better doesn't work. Reality is much better in every case. For me."

But here's a different kind of reality: Despite the critical acclaim her work has received outside of Louisville — in June, Ken Johnson of the *New York Times* wrote that her paintings and charcoal drawings "give traditional Chardin-like realism a distinctly contemporary resonance," and her oil pastel *Onions With Tomato* is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection — Currier has garnered little attention in her hometown.

That's about to change. Currier, who was born and raised and has lived almost all of her adult life in Louisville, is being honored by the Speed Art Museum with a 30-year retrospective for her "remarkable contribution to contemporary American realism." The Oct.4-Dec. 18 exhibition will feature about 35 of her major paintings and pastels from the early '70s to the present, as well as several drawings and photographs. In addition, exhibition-goers will be able to view Currier journal entries chronicling, in words and illustrations, her artistic and intellectual development.

The apostle of realism, whose style and scale transform ordinary objects she finds in her kitchen or courtyard into monuments to the moment, welcomes the belated recognition. "My being in this position now (the Speed show) is because I'm a native daughter," Currier says. "Kentucky and Louisville *should* do things like that for their artists. Other states do. The governor of Florida is giving a friend a medal for outstanding work in the field.

"A lot of local people tell me, 'I'm unfamiliar with your work.' One reason is I don't have shows here. I had three or four originally, and then I went to New York and had shows at galleries there. I've had nine New York solo shows and they've been successful. (Her artworks have sold for $7,000-$40,000.) It's a better stage to be accepted within, more satisfying in a lot of ways. I feel this (Speed exhibition) is great for me. I hope it happens for a lot of people."

Currier was born Mary Ann Ebert to German immigrant parents who settled in western Louisville. Her father was a metal pattern maker and a machinist; her mother's interests were in needlepoint and sewing. Their attention to detail permeates Currier's artwork.

Because the parochial school in their neighborhood was overcrowded, the Eberts sent their only child across town to Sacred Heart Model School. After awhile, she made the 45-minute ride on the streetcar by herself.

The Ursuline nuns at Sacred Heart encouraged the young girl's

interest in art and nurtured her talent in drawing and poster-making. Later, while in high school, Currier saw a "Draw Me" contest in the newspaper. "They asked you to copy the little line drawings," she recalls. The prize was a free correspondence course.

"I decided I would try that," she says. Long story short: After entering three sets of line drawings, the contest's organizers informed the underage Currier that she would win the course if she obtained a sworn affidavit that the work was hers.

The correspondence course pummeled students with brochures about nationwide poster contests. The prize for one was tuition to the student's art school of choice. She won, selecting the Chicago Academy of Art.

Her teachers there were professionals who ran advertising agencies or were successful artists. Armed with her freshman portfolio, she landed a Louisville summer job in advertising at the old Stewart's department store in the heart of downtown. After finishing art school, Currier continued her commercial work at Stewart's for three and a half years.

During that time, she went on a blind date with Lionel Currier, who was from New Orleans and working at his first job as a civil engineer in Hazard, Ky. They married in 1949, settled in Louisville and have lived here for all but 10 years since.

Their three daughters were born in the early to mid-1950s. During that time, Currier took sketch and portrait classes at the Art Center (renamed in 1968 the Louisville School of Art, which merged with the University of Louisville's Department of Fine Art 15 years later). Eventually, the Art Center's director asked her to teach the portrait class. "I had never thought of teaching," she says. "I didn't think I could do that. I thought teachers had it all together." She reluctantly took the job. "I enjoyed it so much," she says now, "that I taught for 20 years."

By 1974, she was devoting more time to her own painting. Three years later, at age 50, she had her first solo show at Byck Gallery. Her black-and-white oil paintings of huge, magnificent irises, lilies and magnolias, inspired by experiments with photography, brought nature's awesome sights inside.

"I received a nice review, a good response, a lot of sales; you know you start so cheap," she says. A second show almost sold out, too.

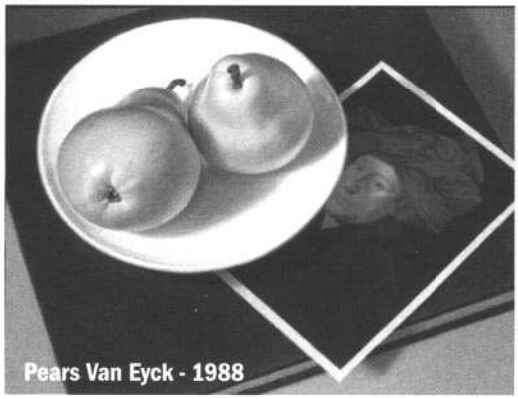
Currier had been paying visits to galleries and museums in New York since the mid-1960s. "I decided I should try for a gallery there," she recalls, even though she knew it would be tough. "You walk in with your folder of slides and you get all these snobbish attitudes," she says. "It's enough to discourage anyone."

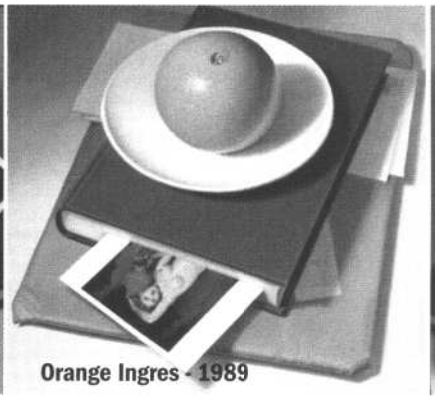
Except Currier.

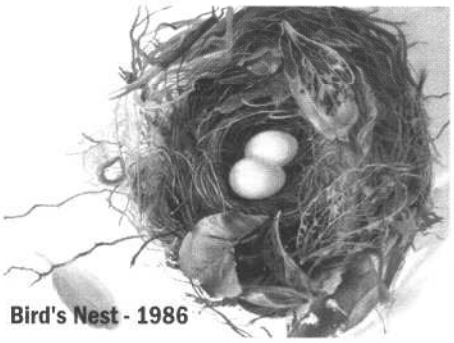
Lo and behold, at her third stop on her initial mission there, gallery owner Alexander Milliken asked her to send him three of her works. "I'll either sell them or send them back to you," he told her. She sent him large onion pastels. He sold all three, one to a gallery in Paris. Milliken became her first dealer.

Red geraniums and white begonias adorn the courtyard of the Curriers' brick house off Brownsboro Road in St. Matthews.

Inside, the house is as meticulously presented as her art. In the living room, two couches face each other and art books are neatly stacked on a coffee table, but it is her own artwork that dominates the room. Two three-foot-square oil pastels from her late-'80s "postcard series" — each of which combines fruit, a postcard print of a work by a favorite artist and a carefully chosen book or dish or other object — fill one wall. A photo-like oil pastel of a brown-twig bird's nest with two eggs inside hangs above the fireplace. The walls of the dining room are filled with large oil pastels of chicken eggs, her explorations of the mysteries of white on white.


Pears Van Eyck - 1988


Orange Ingres - 1989


Bird's Nest - 1986

Today, Currier is wearing a khaki skirt and a lilac blouse with long wooden beads tucked neatly under her collar. Her short gray hair frames her face.

She is no fan of celebrity; nor is she interested in playing a game of connect the psychological dots concerning her artistic abilities and techniques. "Everybody wants to know the personal and they want to analyze the art from the personal," she says. "If they would just look at the art and see what is on the surface. You read an art book and it is more interesting if he cut off his ear, if he did this with a prostitute. It becomes a novel and more interesting than the art, and that is so sad."

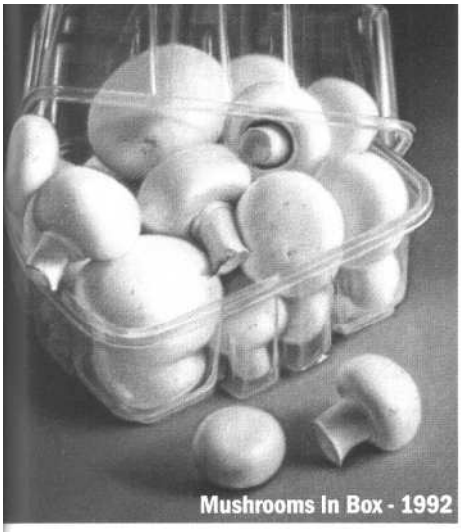
Currier blames a present-day obsession with the psychological process and how we look at people. "If I read Henry James," she says, "I think he's marvelous. But I don't know a thing about Henry James except he must have lived within that upper class because he knows so much about it. But if someone tells me that when he was 12 years old, he did this, I'm not sure whether that adds much to the writing. It just adds a personality figure."

That is her segue to show her studio, which is in one wing of the house. Windows line its front and courtyard sides. Two bookshelves filled with oversize books about such artists as Lichtenstein and Giacometti span the length of one wall. Above a gray couch on another wall is a poster from her 1984 show at the Milliken Gallery.

Framed oil pastels from the postcard series rest against the wall under the shelves along with her rendition of mushrooms in a clear plastic box from the grocery, part of a "modern" food series from the early 1990s that also includes onions wrapped in red netting and pears in plastic wrap.

Her wooden easel stands in the center of the studio beneath two skylights. An exquisite oil painting from her June show at New York's Gerald Peters Gallery — dried roses tinged with red, joined by a soft lime-green ribbon — is propped on the easel.

A homemade stage, about 1½ by 3 feet, stands on a table to the left of the easel. Currier uses a magnifying glass on a gooseneck support to discern details in the real floral scene arranged on the dais. Another table with oil pastels, her tools of choice since 1983 when HK Holbein introduced



Mushrooms In Box - 1992

Plums Van Der Weyden - 1989

its 225-color ultra-rainbow set (the rose paintings being an exception) is to the right of the easel.

"Instead of fresh fruit, these are dried roses," says Currier. "That way, I don't have to worry; you need a lot of energy for concentration and working and the process of going fast and catching things. And that's diminished a little bit for me, so now I paint dry roses."

For consistent light transfer, she turns an incandescent light on the stage and another light on the canvas. "See, if I turn this one off, watch the yellow go out of it," she explains.

Currier is regrouping in the time between her June show and the Speed exhibition. "You need a dead period before you can come alive," she says. Her studio is set up today just to show how she works.

She says she takes some time warming to a new project: "There's a little ritual I do to get ready — something needs putting away or turned around. Then, when I feel nothing more needs attention, I begin to think about what I want to do."

Sometimes, she says, it takes a day to arrange the composition. In the past, she took photographs to help her determine lighting, shading and shapes. Now she makes thumbnail sketches to work out these elements.

Currier calls her super-lifelike portrayals

realism, not photorealism, explaining that in photorealism the painter duplicates a photograph, not actual objects, onto the surface. "I rearrange the scene until I have the satisfaction . . . not just the satisfaction — it's almost a thrill. This is *it*," she says.

To pencil the scene on the stage enlarged onto the canvas or museum board with what she calls "any accuracy," Currier uses a simple handmade grid, a white cardboard frame with a few vertical and horizontal strings, to view and record where the scene's outlines fall. "I am careful to hold it still," she says. "I locate the corners on there and memorize where they hit. That corner has to hit that corner, and that helps me proportion what I'm doing."

When asked to talk about the genesis of her ideas, she bristles a bit. "People think you must have ideas," she says. "'What does it mean' and 'where are the ideas' goes back to the philosophical, the *intention* of the art. I don't have an idea of meaning. If I do it is very subconscious. I'm not saying I'm going to talk about feminism here. I'm not going to say I have deeper meanings than what you see. If you do see something that is more than just the surface, I'm happy for you."

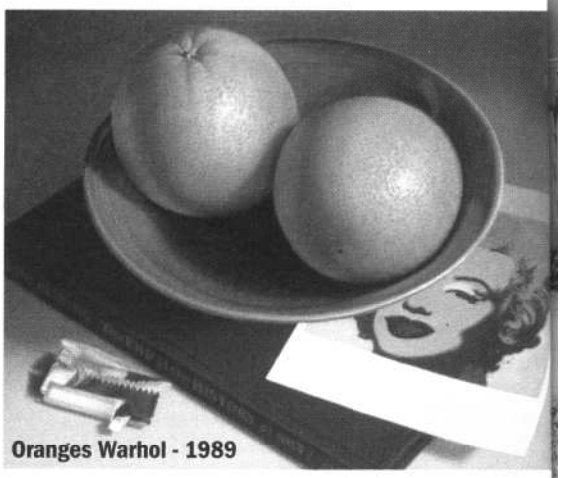
She laughs, relieved she has made her point.

Despite her philosophical ruminations, Currier can poke fun at herself about artistic meaning and purpose. In the late 1980s, Currier was putting together the postcard series, using cards from her collection of favorite artists. She was creating works titled *Pear Vermeer*, *Apples Cezanne* and *Apricots Degas*.

"At the time, I was working with a (Fernand) Léger card. My dealer suggested I do something contemporary because the paintings looked too otherworldly."

He proposed Andy Warhol. "I thought, that's not a bad idea. I had some Warhol cards from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, so I did Warhol's Marilyn Monroe." *Oranges Warhol* includes two oranges and a book by Hans Belting called *The End of the History of Art?* The book is about the triumph of everyday life as art — starting with Warhol.

Currier often includes a commonplace object such as a paper clip or pen or scissors in her work. "This time," she says, "I unwrapped a gum wrapper and put it in the front. . . . I sent it to New York. (Milliken) said, 'Yeah, we really like it. That gum wrapper is the perfect touch.'"


Oranges Warhol - 1989

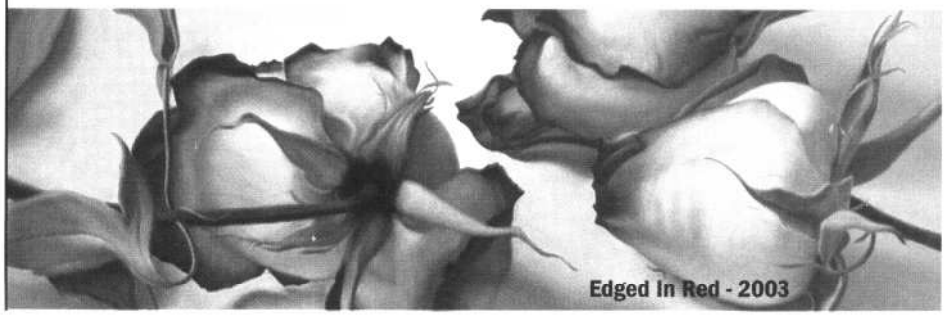
Back in the living room, Currier stands in front of *Orange Ingres,* her three-foot-square oil pastel of an orange on a white plate that sits on top of a book with a postcard of a Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres work protruding from the pages. The book rests on top of an envelope and a package.

Currier tells a story about a female museum docent who had devised an intricate narrative of what the work meant to her. The guide compared the navel on the orange with a physical navel, pointing out that orange means knowledge in the Orient, linking knowledge with Adam and Eve, and relating the Garden of Eden pair to the unopened letter.

After hearing the docent's intricate interpretation, Currier smiled and told her, "I'm so glad for you."

Now she returns to the present and the roses. "For me, to pretend this work has deeper meaning is presumptuous on my part," she says. "It may mean more to me, and then it may not.

"Meaning has become so important. There are times I just want to sit down and draw in awe the wonder I've seen. I don't have to say this means something else. It only means the amazing things I've seen." ■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