

Jason Drake

An American Realist Painter



BY JESSE WOOD

Several months after his oldest son, a professional BASE jumper and videographer, died in a wingsuit crash in Switzerland in early 2014, Jason Drake decided to take a leap of faith of his own.

Drake, now in his early 60s, was working a desk job – much like his son, Brian, before the latter moved to Europe to film human flight. At the time, Drake was employed as an Internet communications director for Samaritan's Purse in Boone. He painted at nights and on the weekends.

Though Drake, who lives in Todd with his wife, Holly, had already sold his work

in galleries and at art shows as a “part-time” artist, Drake realized that to fulfill his dream, he needed to absorb himself into his craft. With confidence from these early sales and the understanding of the brevity of life, Drake quit his job to become an American realist painter.

“That led me to think very hard about whether or not – because life is short – I wanted to get going on this pursuit, whether it was time for me to launch, for me to take a leap of faith like he would,” said Drake. “That helped prompt me to say, ‘This is time.’”

As a kid and perhaps like many budding artists of his generation, Drake was copying the “Peanuts” comic strip and other cartoons. “I suppose Charles Schulz launched an awful lot of artists,” Drake joked. Later as he prepared for life as an adult, Drake came to a crossroads. “It was like this boyhood dream. Should I paint or fly airplanes? And I went to fly airplanes,” he said, choosing to major in aeronautical engineering and enlist in the military.

Fast forward a few decades – brushing past his military career and website development with a large agency in Los Ange-



Under the Porch by Jason Drake

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les – Drake arrived in the High Country in 1999 to work for the Christian nonprofit Samaritan's Purse. Steadily through the years, though, he'd been honing his creative skills in illustration, graphic design, sketching and painting. He furthered his painting studies by watching videos, taking online tutorials and attending workshops. About a decade ago, Drake took his evolution as an artist one step further. He decided to create a lasting body of work to brand himself as a fine artist. He wanted to give art collectors and gallery owners a reason to hang his art on their walls.

"I felt at that point, 'I think I can make it.' I can produce work that is certainly sellable and comparable," Drake said. "And, of course, we all dream, 'I want to be as good as ...' You see the masters out there you idolize, and yes, that's something for me, too."

Several years ago, Drake started taking his paintings to the Blowing Rock Frameworks and Art Gallery to be framed. At first, Tim Miller, the owner of the art gallery, mistook his paintings for the work of a great American artist of the middle 20th century.

"When I figured out he had painted them, I was immediately impressed. Jason is not one to boast. He's really modest and I really, really thought I could sell his paintings," Miller said. "I kept framing paintings for him, and I think finally in 2012, I couldn't resist any longer." Miller asked Drake to be in a group show that summer. "Almost as soon as we hung them up, we sold them," Miller mentioned.

For Miller, who has been an art gallery owner for more than two decades, Drake's paintings evoke a bygone peacefulness and hark back to when "everything was a little



"People love his work and can relate to the realism. Jason strives." — Tim Miller, owner of Blowing Rock Frameworks and Art Gallery



Watauga County Barn (above) and Upstream (below) are two of Jason Drake's works featured in his 2017 book, *Jason Drake: American Realist Painter*. A watercolor on paper, Watauga County Barn will be featured in Drake's "Close to Home" exhibit in August.



simpler and the world wasn't as crazy." Miller said that Drake's work, which features landscapes, animals and people of the High Country, puts him at ease. "People love his work and can really relate to the realism," Miller said. "Jason strives. He works hard at his craft, and he's developed quite a following around here. We are fortunate to have Jason."

Since that first show in Blowing Rock, Drake has sold about 70 paintings, and he has collectors waiting in the wings to buy more Jason Drake originals. His paintings have sold and been accepted into galleries, exhibits and museum auctions across the country. His images are now also circulating in national fine art magazines, such as *Fine Art Connoisseur*, "the premiere magazine for informed collectors."

This past February, The Bennington Center for the Arts in Vermont invited Drake to submit representational paintings for its *Artists of the Century* show that is held every five years. This exhibit, which features roughly 80 artists, will open in September and run through most of December in Bennington, Vt.

In March, Drake sold his egg tempera piece, *The End of Summer*, in the C.M. Russell Museum's annual art auction in Great Falls, Montana. Drake's painting sold for \$5,000 in the auction that was attended by more than 500 collectors. After auction weekend concluded, the museum event grossed \$6.3 million in painting sales. A collector from Arizona, Doug Cardon put in the winning bid for Drake's *The End of Summer*.

In a testimonial for the painting and Drake's talent, Cardon wrote: "I love the lighting in 'The End of Summer' and the radiance of the young girl's face. The lines of the Canada Geese, the trees, and the shades of grass give movement to the work that, for the moment, seems to be on 'pause.' The colors are so pleasant. Those were the elements that caught my eye and kept me bidding. At age 67, I welcome all the pauses I can come by and I am sure that I will spend many hours enjoying this painting. The painting arrived over a week ago ... I am so happy that I was able to get it. You have obviously done something special here."

When Drake was younger, he was influenced by Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle. Later, he was drawn to masters such as Sargent, Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. As he developed his painting talents, Drake said he learned from these masters and copied



The above egg tempera painting, *The End of Summer*, sold at C.M. Russell Museum's annual auction in Great Falls, Montana for \$5,000 in March 2017.



Photo by Todd Bush

Jason Drake paints in his studio at his home in Todd.

them in the beginning. Along the way, he began painting on his terms and developing his style. Still though, as talented as he's become, he hasn't stopped perfecting his craft.

"I am always learning in my work and not just about how to paint, I really enjoy learning about the materials of painting, even chemistry of painting and the techniques of painting," Drake said. "I am always trying to learn and develop and better the skills I have."

Drake said he's "slowly moving over to" the egg tempera medium. Currently, oil and watercolor dominate his portfolio, but his recent egg tempera pieces, such as *The End of Summer*, which was sold at the Montana museum and *The Promise of Spring*, which sold through a gallery in Charleston, S.C., are stunning images, powerful and graceful. In fact, egg tempera master Koo Schadler praised Jason's foray into this medium and described his work as "beautiful and accomplished; his tonal sense is excellent."

Egg tempera, which consists of egg yolks bound to color pigments, has been around for thousands of years and was the popular painting method used until oil came on the scene in the 1500s. As Drake noted, the great Michelangelo has egg tempera pieces in existence as he painted during this transition in the 16th century.

Drake's pieces in this medium have a harmonizing glow to them, which is attributed to the translucency and multiple layers of paint used with the egg tempera medium. For Drake, there is also the satisfaction of partaking in the entire process of crafting a painting – from making the paint, the canvass, the concept, the sketches and finally a finished composition ready to be framed. In addition to creating some of his paints, he also makes some of his own primed canvasses and boards.

"That part of the craftsmanship I enjoy," Drake said. "It gives me



Photo by Todd Bush

Holding Max, artist Jason Drake is flanked by his youngest son, Jordan, and wife, Holly.



Drake's painting of St. John's of the Lower Watauga Episcopal Church in Valle Crucis will be featured in his "Close to Home" exhibit in August.

a sense of being able to provide something as a product that I've worked on from the very beginning and my work goes into making it better and better."

Each of Drake's paintings begins with a concept. He doesn't just see a beautiful hillside, sunset or meandering stream around the bend and decide to paint that scene. "I don't do that. I'm more inclined to want to have a real concept when I sit down with a real idea for the composition. That makes my work have a better focus," Drake said. "I believe that art communicates. It

communicates what the artist wants to say. I need to have purpose and a concept before I start my paintings."

For example, *The Promise of Spring* painting came about because the gallery, Robert Lange Studios in Charleston, S.C., requested entries that depicted nature's resiliency in the face of decaying man-made objects. What Drake composed was an image of a young girl holding a daffodil. She was standing on a meadow as an old dilapidated farmhouse sat on the horizon in the background. In his 2017 book, *Jason Drake: American Realist Painter*, Drake wrote of

Ah ... Almost Perfect! Now, just add the wine.



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An art collector in Raleigh purchased *The Promise of Spring* from a gallery in Charleston, S.C., recently. This is another one of Drake's lovely egg tempera paintings.

the image: "As the old decays and returns to nature, the new emerges and the promise of life is experienced again. 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast,' resounds from the poet's hand."

Another painting featured in that book is titled, *Upstream*, a 35-by-42 inch oil on linen. In this painting, a young woman stands on a boulder, staring at the bend in the river. Drake said this woman had recently graduated high school and the image is symbolic of her looking toward the future. The rock represented a sturdy foundation around a moving river. "I called the painting *Upstream* because she's looking kind of against the flow, and there were a lot of things in that young girl's life

that I knew at the time that were represented by the painting," Drake said.

Once he has a concept, characters and a setting in mind, Drake will snap photos of settings and characters – not necessarily in the same place – for reference. Then he'll perform pencil and paint sketches before painting the final composition. Though his work is beginning to circulate nationally, all of his paintings are set in the High Country and the characters are local folks he happens to know. This is partly why his upcoming show at Blowing Rock Frameworks and Art Gallery is titled, "Close to Home."

"So often people see my work and they will think of maybe someone else in



Jason Drake stands in his art studio in Todd with works completed and in progress in the background. Photo by Todd Bush

their family or they'll think of some place they've been or of a simpler way of life," Drake said. "I want my work to be something that people identify with, something that evokes a sense of feeling and emotion from them, and I also want my work to be something that even evokes [and latches onto] a memory or a thought or an experience they have."

The exhibit runs from Aug. 14 to 26, and a reception will be held on Saturday, Aug. 19 from 5 to 8 p.m. The way Drake generally sells his work is by setting aside a year's worth of paintings to be shown and sold at his annual shows at Tim Miller's gallery in Blowing Rock. Drake's shows, Miller said, are – by a significant margin – the most anticipated of the year. Nearly 20 of Drake's newest paintings will be on display. For more information, click to www.jasondrake.com or www.blowingrockgalleries.com. ♦



Jason Drake's Exhibit at Blowing Rock in August

What: Jason Drake: Close To Home

Where: Blowing Rock Frameworks and Art Gallery, Aug. 14-26

When: Reception: Saturday, Aug. 19 from 5 to 8 p.m. & Exhibition: Aug. 14-26

Presenting a solo exhibition of work by American realist painter Jason Drake, Aug. 14-26. Jason lives and paints in the Appalachian Mountains near Boone and his new pieces represent the theme "Close to Home." They feature watercolor, egg tempera, and oil compositions depicting the landscapes, figures and still life, subjects that emerge from the mountain community where he lives. He is a penetrating observer of the quiet, simple, framework that makes up life in this region and his compositions evoke the emotion he suffuses into each painting. A reception will be held on Saturday, Aug. 19 from 5 to 8 pm where you can meet the artist.



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