Art of Our Time
Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Pretty, yes! Even beautiful? The painting, of course. But the woman, too? Thank you. I’m not sure it’s a good likeness, though I mean no criticism of the artist’s skill. I would have gone about it differently. I just look so healthy, so young. Maybe that’s how I appeared at the time, what my husband saw as he gazed at me with loving eyes. At the time of the sitting, I was feeling fine, maybe just a little tired. Two years later, I would be dead – my painter a widower, my baby motherless.

My own mother died when I was an infant. I might have considered it a warning.

But how would I guess my own fate? Pneumonia, coming on the heels of marriage and maternity. It was a common enough death at the time. It could have happened to anyone, even in our privileged class. That it found me might have been just coincidence. But everyone knew I was tired. I was tired from caring for a teething baby, an aging father, and my virtuoso spouse. We went to Paris so he would paint, and maybe this was my undoing. For, as I hope you know, I was a painter, too.

Or it had been, before I was a mother. A woman painter. It was agreed that I had a real talent with watercolor – nurtured, from the very beginning, by my father’s devotion and wealth. I was never a virtuosa. Virtuosa. But I might have been.

This “might” is what kills me. What killed me.

Or maybe it was just my lungs.

My father was against the marriage from the start. It’s not that he didn’t like Frank. On the contrary, he liked him very much. He bought Frank’s paintings and paid him to teach me, because, for me, he would have only the very best. But he didn’t want me to fall in love, to marry the tutor, to marry so far beneath me. Socially, he meant. Frank had no money, no connections. Artistically, Frank was my better. Artistically, I was marrying up. For all my father’s protectiveness, I don’t think he understood that this was where the real danger lay.

In the beginning, those glorious days in Italy, we both were painters, husband and wife. I was happy. I painted a barefoot mother. Then I became one myself. I was gripped by that love, all that new need, and my painting came to an end.

Yet I am not so full of regret. In my short life, I lived fully. I was loved. I was a mother. And I was an artist. Just not all at the same time. My portrait of a child hangs in a museum, and I gave birth to a child as well. How many can say that? In my day, not many. In that way, I got to live twice.

And yet today, in museums, you are more likely to see me, my likeness, than what I thought or saw. I am more famous as a subject: a well-loved and departed wife, immortalized in paint and in sculpture, an alabaster tomb.

Laura Moriarty
Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Loving to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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