

ARLENE DISTLER

Jon Gregg

Jon Gregg is a painter's painter. His trust in the medium is absolute, manifested through patient discovery and revelation, elucidating soulfulness in his paintings. But watching Gregg work can be painful. He puts down a mark, a form appears, and then he scrapes the oil paint away over and over until, for the moment, he's satisfied. He speaks of his resistance to being "too declarative" with his mark making, and a love of *pentimento* (where a part of a painting underneath is allowed to show through). What appears to the observer as struggle, for Gregg is play. "Painting is the most fun thing I know," he professes. The result is like Chinese boxes—surprises within surprises, both subtle and illuminated—runes that are figures and objects embedded in landscapes that feel timeless yet immediate.

Gregg is a devotee of Tibetan Buddhism. He asserts there are Buddhist principles at work in what he calls the "wonderful practice" of painting: a kind of meditation—acceptance of what is ("I try to accept whatever is there and let it be what it wants to be"); of impermanence and letting go, forgoing attachment to a finished product. "I could paint the same painting for the rest of my life and I'd be happy!" he says, suggesting that artworks are never truly *finished*.

Not surprisingly, Gregg's studio is a cluttered affair, the walls filled top to bottom with paintings that he is working on simultaneously... as many as 15 at a time. The rim of his metal garbage can is encrusted with scraped oil paint. He uses these semi-dry, multi-hued scrapings to mold tiny figures that line the studio walls.



Above: Jon Gregg in his studio. Photo: Warren Buckles. Below: Jon Gregg, *Kurta* (detail), 2016, oil on canvas, 48 x 56". Photo: Howard Romero.

Nothing is wasted.

He uses oilbars instead of paintbrushes because "my drawing hand is strong—I've always drawn [and] it is better for picking up texture," he says. He then carves into the paint using an array of serendipitous mark-making instruments such as chopsticks, to reveal a horse, the spokes of a wheel, a crowned head, a mask. His iconography is distinct and personal and appears in his large canvases, smaller paintings on paper, and his sketchbooks.

Even more than his paintings, though, Gregg might be most well-known as the founder, and president for 33 years, of the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT. Over the years, he has grabbed what time he could from overseeing this artists' retreat—the largest in the United States, if not the world—to paint. "I don't have to commute and I never have to cook (his house and studio are adjacent to the main VSC building)...I use those four hours I save every day to paint." He has been painting more intensively since he retired in 2015.

Many of these works will be on display at the Mitchell • Giddings Fine Arts gallery starting in July. The exhibition, consisting of 12 large paintings on canvas, 20 works on paper, and his sketchbooks will be shown

in the gallery as well as in downtown Brattleboro in the newly renovated Brooks House's Atrium. This will be one of the largest solo shows Gregg has had, and one of the very few in a commercial gallery, something he feels more comfortable with, he said, since retiring.

One of these paintings, *Pogo*, with its stylized tree—its leaves fanning out from the serpentine trunk—is like a medieval manuscript illumination, highly stylized, elemental and deeply evocative. His works on paper, which are mostly untitled, have an appealing spontaneity and looseness and brim with Gregg's intriguing hieroglyphs.

When Gregg was a boy, he drew all the time. Then his father, an engineer, forbade him to continue. He eventually became an architect. But when he was 38 years old, he started making art again. He would retreat into the laboratory of his studio, aiming to "undermine my conscious mind" and allow what one might call free-association drama and narrative to arise from the paint.

Arlene Distler is a writer on the arts for regional and national publications as well as a poet. She lives in Brattleboro, VT.



Jon Gregg: Evolving a Mark
 On view July 14–August 14, 2016
 Mitchell • Giddings Fine Arts
 Brattleboro, VT
mitchellgiddingsfinearts.com