

Monthly Berkshire Artzine Since 1994

# THE ARTFUL MIND

JANUARY INTO FEBRUARY 2011



JANET MCKINSTRY  
BERKSHIRE ARTISAN AND UCC PASTOR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE MCCARTHY



# JANET MCKINSTRY

## BERKSHIRE

## ARTISAN AND

## PASTOR

*Photography by Julie McCarthy  
Interview by Harryet Candee*

**Janet, you wear a lot of hats. You're a fiber artist: making hand bags, quilts, hats and more; you make puppets and tell stories, you're an illustrator and have published a children's book that's presently out on the market today called, *Rosie and Friends: Unleashed in Berkshire County*, which I believe is also a joint effort with your Dad, John McKinstry. And! — you're an ordained pastor in Berkshire County.**

**How do you manage to make all these fields of interest work so harmoniously for you? There are only a certain amount of hours in one day!**

Janet: Our lives are so compartmentalized with work life, weekends, family life, and all our other activities that we feel "in pieces" all the time, and perhaps we've grown accustomed to it. I long for wholeness. I think that's what people mean when they say, "The good old days." It is a challenge to find time to create art, that I love to do, so I try and apply it to everything I do.

Working with puppets, writing children's books, and being a pastor all mesh together because a big part of what I do as a pastor is bringing stories to life. There is a verse in the bible that said that Jesus taught the people only in parables. We learn about our selves and the mystery of life through stories, not through didactic teaching. Stories are fun and engage us. I choose to be engaged in life!

The fiber artist in me is also connected because it really comes from my love of costumes. It is also very practical expression of art for me because selling them puts bread on the table.

**Yes, the bread on the table is quiet important for survival, especially when we are so tuned into the arts. We are successful at not being starving artists so much of the time.**

**How do you describe your growing years? What were they like for you?**

Janet: I divide my growing years into a 'before and after', meaning before Connecticut, and after moving to the Berkshires.

I grew up a pastor's kid in a very upscale Connecticut town of Essex where the peer pressure of social class was tremendous. If your parents didn't own a yacht or you didn't wear the right alligator shirt you were looked down upon. Well, we didn't have a yacht. At the age of 12 we moved to the Berkshires, and I remember the joy of having all of that pressure lifted. In think it's because of the concentration in the Arts. Moving to the Berkshires opened my mind to other ways of living, and it is here where the artist in me began to flourish and be accepted.

In my children's book *Rosie, (the dog)*, discovers she's a mutt and learns that nobody really cares. They love her just the same. This is why the Berkshires is such a magical place and why I moved back here after living in New York City and Boston to raise my daughter.

**This is a good place to raise children. Lots of space, lots of challenges, plenty of green. Anyhow, Janet, knowing that you attended Fashion Institute of Technology, in New York City, what can you tell me that you've learned during those years in city art school that still stands strong in your artistic/work belief system now, and what experiences have you discarded that you believe doesn't work for you? Did you like city life?**

Janet: I loved living in New York City. It was the best time of my life. Even though I love the Berkshires, it can also become a "fish bowl"; especially being a preacher's kid and now, especially being a preacher!! Moving to New York City was again, another liberation and turning point in my life. There was always excitement at F.I.T., lots of drama like on "Project Runway". (A relatively new reality TV show featuring emerging fashion designers. One contestant, after a handful of remaining finalists have been finally disqualified, wins the jackpot, and dream-of-a-life-time comes true with lots of money and goodies solely promoting and supporting their up and coming career in the fashion world.) The beauty now, is that I look at this world from the outside. When you are part of it, (The Fashion World), it is very competitive which was very well portrayed in the movie, "The Devil Wears Prada". This part of the industry I don't like and in the end it actually stifles creativity. I remember my first job as a fashion buying assistant for a major catalogue company. My job was to get samples of creative designers and send them to our manufacturers to "knock-off". I've even seen my own ideas "knocked-off", but that's okay because it's the creative process for me that was, and still is exciting. I just moved on to the next thing. My philosophy is, "don't compete, create!!"

**Creating is the best part in art, but we can never escape the cut throat competition in the fields, any where on the planet, and all through our lives. For me, it makes me thirsty for success...or something. Okay, looking back on the past Christmas Eve Worship service that took place in Stockbridge that you were directly involved in, were you nervous to get up and say it like it is? What's the process for you for conjuring up the words and thoughts for a sermon?**

Janet: At first, when I started, I was terrified to speak in public. I remember getting up to the pulpit with my knees buckling. It all began to change when one of my teachers had our class memorize scripture and recite it in front of the class. I learned



*Marionettes and stage, hand painted and designed by Janet McKinstry*

that there is something about owning your words, knowing them by heart, and being clear about what you want to say that builds confidence to help overcome fear. Again, it goes back to story telling and my art. A good storyteller knows the story by heart. The process of memorizing a story, or a poem by heart is an interesting process. You enter into a relationship and the words “work” on you as deeper meanings are revealed. For me, the process is similar in painting. In order to paint a scene you must enter into a deeper relationship with what you are painting and you begin to really “see” things that were hidden or you were blind to before.

**I was wondering your thoughts about how you feel about sharing deep, very spiritual thoughts and sacred experiences while at the bedside of a person who is going through a serious life crisis? What do you feel is important to offer to one who you are comforting, and praying with.**

Janet: I would never be able to do what I do and offer comforting words to others if I have not experienced some “taste” of the sacred myself. In mainstream Protestant churches we don’t often talk about religious experiences. It’s more about serving others, but, I feel this is why our churches are on the decline in membership. We need to bring back this “taste” of the sacred because God’s spirit should feed us and not deplete us. I think spiritual practices like meditation and contemplative prayer are vitally important because they connect us with the Source, the center of strength and love. I often read the writings of people who survived the Concentration Camps for inspiration: that it is possible to live through the most horrendous conditions and still find hope and meaning.

**And so I will move on, and ask you about one our favorite subjects – Dog and drawing them and others. Was your illustrated book, Rosie & Friends, dedicated to an animal that existed(s) in your life? How did you come up with the story?**

Janet: Truth is funnier than fiction—that is the case with my children’s book, “Rosie & Friends” which I did base on my dog Rosie.

The day after I bought Rosie, my mom showed me a picture in the Newspaper and asked, “Is this the man who sold you your dog?” He was arrested on drug charges. I thought it would be great to start my story with a dead-beat dog dealer. Animals teach us how to love and because of my love for Rosie, I was motivated to spend a year and a half working on this book, writing it and illustrating it. The book is a combination of truth and fiction. All of the characters and animals I based on real people and animals from the Berkshires. Kiara, my cat is very cranky. In the book some of my favorite lines are about her, for example: “Trouble followers her like the scent of a stinky skunk. She thinks she’s street-wise but we call her a dumb alley cat!”

**This is a wonderful book, and it’s really good for adults as well as children. The illustrations are sensitive as well as detailed. Full pages of all different animals, scenes, still lifes – all lovingly rendered with utmost**

**care and serious technique. Lets travel now. Where you are wearing yet another hat: the hat of the Fiber artist. Your hand bags, and other beautiful items incorporate a richly detailed tapestry of warm hues; fabrics meshed to one another with Victorian and Ethnic kind of artisan style. What inspired you to go with this particular retrospective venue? It’s your style, going strong and steady!**

Janet: I began designing my own line of clothing when I owned a vintage clothing store in Boston. I used to take apart old worn out dresses that had beautiful designs and make patterns from them. I acquired a taste for vintage clothing because my family always shopped at thrift stores. I learned how to spot fine designer and vintage clothes from racks of rags at a very young age. I began making bags from some swatches that were being thrown out by a local store. As I started making them I developed a taste for rich colors and unique upholstery. I always wanted a carpet bag like Mary Poppins. My bags are a blending of ethnic, old world European, and Victorian: “East meets West” you might say. I want them to have a sense of mystery and intrigue so people wonder... “What’s in that bag?” and especially, “Where did you get it?” They are sculpture to me. People can wear my bags knowing they have a one-of-a-kind work of art. It’s wearable art. No bag is ever the same. I lie awake

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*Handbags made by Janet of fine upholstery.*

at night thinking about new designs and closures. It's fun.

**It's more than fun! It's a career, too! Do you enjoy selling your fabric design pieces in the open market scene, perhaps under those billowy white tents? What should newcomers to the seller's market, to that particular scene described, be advised of from your point of view and experiences?**

Janet: I enjoy selling directly to the public, but it's exhausting. Often the craft shows are on a Saturday and Sunday which is not convenient with my other hat as pastor. Setting up can also be very strenuous. That said, I think that the growing number of craft shows all over the country is a wonderful thing. So many people have lost their jobs and to make something and sell it, is a wonderful way to gain self esteem and income. The key is to create something marketable and in this economy that means functional.

I tell people that this is a great time to be an artist. I use to try and sell my designs to stores who said I would never be able to compete with Chinese and other handcrafted imports. Now people's consciousness has shifted. It's all about supporting local artists. Locally made; locally grown!! You can't imagine how much this has helped me. It means now I can do what I love and finally be supported.

**Amen, Janet. Hmm, especially in our community! Seeing what is around you in the art and design world, is anything in particular trending these days that you have noticed which may directly effect you?**

Technology certainly has its effect on the art world for both good and bad. There is always a lot of research that goes into producing a work of art. The internet allows research to be done far more productively. Technology also allows more people to view my art and the state of the art technology incorporated into theater and movies adds very dramatic effects, but there is something about the personal touch that speaks to me in art. Children learn all the classic stories on TV and movies with all the dramatic effects, but there is something about the essence of a live performance that is lost in technology. That is why I make puppets and built a puppet theater. I want kids to experience live drama. Something hand-made without the aid of technology is rare and I hope that we have not lost the ability to value and know when something is "really" hand made.

**Where can you find REAL art? What is to you real art?**

I think real art is art that deeply affects us and lifts us to a higher place. What do I mean by a higher place? A place where we are open to more questioning; mystery; a place where we are lifted outside of our small selves where fear, pettiness, and self absorption rule and are opened to searching for and questioning meaning. Real art appears when we are open to new possibilities. Great art comes as a breakthrough into something new and then loses its power by being copied for a generation or two until the next breakthrough.

Art becomes stagnant when it is just copying the past. Real art is never static it is always seeking. I think the power of real art has been lost or I hope, is recently being rediscovered. For instance, in the middle ages in Europe triptych paintings were used in hospitals in convents to heal people. The sick would sit in front of a painting to be cured of their disease. In the

Middle East songs of healing were sung around the bedside. Christian Icons had and have tremendous power, but they lose their power when they are viewed behind glass in a museum. It is not the art but the state of the artist who creates the art that makes real art.

**What art work these days would you consider to be Unique?**

Janet: In order to be unique you have to be completely authentic to yourself, because each person is unique. To discover one's authentic self takes time for self-discovery and risk. But we all have to begin somewhere and the best place to learn is by copying others. Many singers mimic the voices of their favorite pop artists. Painters learn by copying the masters, but there comes a point when you need to deviate from all that you have learned and dare to express your uniqueness. It's truly a liberating moment. To create something truly unique requires a lot of energy. For instance, it's really easy when I have a design that sells to just keep duplicating it, but to come up with something new, requires much more thought. When I see someone creating something truly unique it is like a breath of fresh air!



*Janet's puppets, made from scratch. A realistic approach. Sensitive, and filled with wisdom*

**Would you ever consider moving back to New York City if a very desirable opportunity was offered to you in one of your art fields?**

Janet: I love the energy of New York City and would love to have my little apartment in Greenwich Village back if I could afford it. It would have to be on my own terms. I don't think I could be seduced by any proposition because my greatest joy is having my days free to create what ever I want. Today I'm preaching, making bags and puppets but I want the freedom to be open to what tomorrow will bring. No money in the world can purchase this joy!

**If there was any particular place on this planet you would like to live, where would that be?**

Janet: I use to dream of having a beautiful home with gardens but the reality is that home would soon become a prison. Who's going to care for the home when I want to paint all day? There are many places in this world I would love to travel to, but I suppose I do have this fantasy of owning a yurt by a stream in a quiet place that would always be mine to come home to.

**If you were to do your life all over again, Janet, what would you change, what would you keep the same?**

Janet: I wish I could live my life with less fear. It is interesting in the New Testament whenever the angels visit they first have to say, "Fear not!" Fear keeps us from experiencing so many things. Fear builds walls between people and keeps us from truly communicating with one another. There are times when we are rightfully fearful but often it is a product of our imagination. I gave up so many opportunities as a child because of fear. I think that most people have a desire to create art and it is fear that holds them back.

In spite of this, I had a wonderful childhood; a very loving family who nurtured me and provided the atmosphere where art flourished. Both of my parents are artists.

**Describe to me what a piece of art you have created, that sends a message of importance that we all should have in our belief systems? In what medium, without verbalizing, do you communicate best in?**

Janet: My puppets, right now, are my most important medium. I say this because I really want to explore painting next, and I can't wait to see what discoveries lie ahead. I love faces, and it's the face of the puppet that is most important. I want their expressions to have soul so that when people look

at my puppets they see mirrored the depths of their own souls. None of my marionette faces are happy faces, but they are joyous and I think there's a difference.

Life is a mixture of joy and sorrow and only when we've experienced true sorrow can we experience true joy. They come together. I seek to relay that while I sculpt their faces. I find comic relief, though, in my hand puppets. When you work a hand puppet there's a certain liberty to say anything you want. It's the puppet saying it, right? That's why hand puppets are so dangerous and so fun!!!

**What to you, means Truth?**

Janet: Ahh! That is the question! And I hope I never stop searching for the answer.

**Why do you think that your puppets may actually know more than you do?**

Janet: There is an amazing moment when I've finally finished a puppet and I put on their strings. They come to life right before my eyes and they take on a life of their own. There is something "other" that I can't quiet describe in words. It's as if they are coming from somewhere else and trying to tell me something important but I can't quiet make out what they're saying.

**What do you think was your best commissioned art piece?**

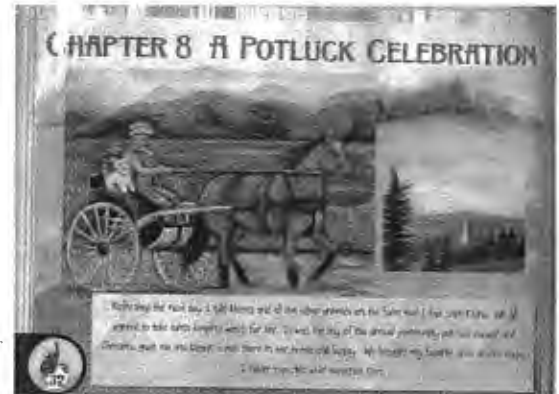
Janet: My best artwork is never commissioned. Commissioning for me takes the joy out of art. I believe Michelangelo probably couldn't wait to finish the Sistine Chapel so that he could get back to create what he loved.

**When looking back, do you have a favorite sermon that you remember giving to the public?**

Janet: It is always a painful lesson when preparing sermons, that I often find interesting isn't so interesting to others, and what I find humorous—others don't! After 8 years of writing sermons I haven't yet discovered the right formula. Some people are touched by something I say. Others aren't. I suppose we're all coming with different needs and sometimes I meet that need.

I think my best sermons are for children. I've written numerous stories as sermons for children that I'd like to collect





into a book someday with illustrations.

I think my most touching sermon was when I spoke about the need to give our children a faith life. I heard "the call" to go into the ministry when I was working with inner-city kids who were lucky to make it to school alive. It is a war zone in our inner cities. I began to see that there were some children that had an extra spark to rise above their surroundings and I began to question them. All of these kids had parents who instilled in them a belief in a loving God. It didn't matter what religion! They were given something priceless. We do a great disservice to our children when we deny them this.

**Have you ever witnessed a miracle after you finished a piece of art?**

Janet: Yes, I've had mysterious experiences and friends who have shared their experiences with me. Two memorable experiences had to do with religious icons. I went with a friend to a Russian Orthodox service where we prostrated ourselves in front of the icon of a Saint, I have forgotten who it was. Several days later this Saint visited me in a very "real" way in a dream. Several years later I decided to try painting an icon of Christ and just as I was finishing there was a huge burst of thunder. I went outside and there was no storm outside. I had a composer friend who fell ill and couldn't finish a commissioned work. During the night the music was given to him by angels. I've actually read other similar stories.

Most of the art that I create comes from a desire that seems out of my control. I just have to follow it. For instance, I just woke up one day with the desire to make puppets, so I just followed where it led me. The same thing happened with my children's book, and going into the ministry. I woke up one day in a cold sweat and knew that I could not go on with my life until I became a minister. Many of us have these "calls" or experiences with mystery, but run away from them or deny them.

**What does moral courage mean to you?**

Janet: It is a very rare thing because it may mean imprisonment of the ultimate cost of your life. Examples to me of those with moral courage, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Liu Xiaobo in China, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma.

**And for you, what are some of your future plans as an artist?**

Janet: I'm working on a puppet show that will be ready by this spring. My husband is a musician, so we are collaborating live puppets with music. I'm not sure right now where this show will take us.

As my puppetry grows, I have dreams of being able to offer work with those in need with, not only a paying job, but a fun one working with puppets. Imagine, earning a living by having fun and playing once again like when we were children?

**What is your next big challenge you are yet to be faced?**

Janet: How to put my daughter through college!!!! I'm going to have to sell a whole lot of puppets and bags!!!!

**So, with that thought in mind, what is it that you tend to wish for in your life?**

Janet: My wish is to stay healthy and never grow up completely!



*Painter, pastor, sculptor, marionette maker, fiber artist - that's Jane, wearing many hats in the Berkshires  
Photo: Julie McCarthy*