



Expressions of Place

The Contemporary Louisiana Landscape

JOHN R. KEMP

UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI • JACKSON

Contents

Preface ix

Contemporary Louisiana Landscape Painters xi

Contemporary Louisiana Landscapes by Region xiii

Introduction 3

Artist Profiles and Paintings 17

Preface

The Swiss-born artist Paul Klee once said, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes it visible.” Capturing and viewing images of a landscape is an expression of self—the “self” of the artist and everything he or she brings to the image, and the “self” of viewers and all of their predispositions. With that in mind, I approached this project not as an art critic or art historian, but as a journalist who has spent more than three decades writing about Louisiana art and artists and how they see themselves in their art.

When I began my writing career, first as a curator at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans and later at the New Orleans *States-Item* and then the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, I had ambitions of writing about Louisiana politics. Then, in 1980, I wrote an article about three artists living north of Lake Pontchartrain in St. Tammany Parish. One was a sculptor, William Binnings, the other a painter, Rolland Harve Golden, and the third, novelist Walker Percy. That experience launched a long career that has produced numerous books and hundreds of articles about Southern artists, especially Louisiana artists, for various regional and national magazines. In addition, since 1987, I have covered the New Orleans art scene for *Steppin’ Out*, the weekly entertainment show on New Orleans public television station WYES. Since the early 1990s, I also have served as the New Orleans correspondent for the New York-based international *ARTnews* magazine and as art columnist for *Louisiana Life* magazine, an adventure that has taken me from one end of the state to the other in search of talented artists. Early on, I learned that artists, unlike anyone else in my experience, have the gift and ability to teach others how to see the seemingly ordinary world around them through their eyes.

Although *Expressions of Place* features thirty-seven artists, there are many more good landscape painters working in Louisiana. I could not include all of them. I selected the artists in this book based on geography, subject matter, painting style, or accomplishment, and whether the urban or rural Louisiana was the primary focus of their work. Many are acclaimed professionals whose paintings are included in major private and public collections regionally and nationally, while others have found their followings closer to home. All, however, are driven to express their impressions of the land. Their styles range from traditional representational imagery to the symbolic and almost totally abstract—yet each is an interpretation of the Louisiana landscape. In addition, I intentionally included only the work of landscape painters and not photographers or, with a couple of exceptions, those who work in mixed media. Although the latter groups continue to produce sophisticated and creative interpretations of the landscape, my purpose was to focus on painting, the historic medium that launched the landscape genre.

I also did not include self-taught or so-called outsider artists, a topic handled masterfully by the New Orleans art historian Alice Rae Yelen in her 1993 landmark book, *Passionate Visions of the American South: Self-Taught Artists from 1940 to the Present*. Although debatably a separate genre than trained painters who interpret or respond to the landscape, self-taught artists across the state such as Sarah Albritton (Ruston), Alvin Batiste (Donaldsonville), Lorraine Gendron (Hahnville), Hank Holland (Lockport), Clementine Hunter (Cane River region near Natchitoches), M. C. “5 Cent” Jones (Eagle Shute and Gilliam), and many others create dreamlike images not as a response to the landscape but as cultural memories of a

people, their religion, and their stories. The landscape is only a contextual prop for those memories.

Over the years, many books have been written about various aspects of Louisiana art, especially historic overviews. The most notable of these are Randolph Delehanty's *Art in the American South: Works from the Ogden Collection* (1996) and Estill Curtis Pennington's *Downriver: Currents of Style in Louisiana Painting 1800–1950* (1991). More recently, the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities created its online reference *KnowLA: Encyclopedia of Louisiana*, and published, with the University Press of Mississippi, *A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Art in Louisiana* (2012), of which I was a coeditor and a major contributing writer. Each of these publications gives readers a broad historical and encyclopedic view of the visual arts in Louisiana. *Expressions of Place*, however, is a natural extension of these latter two publications because it focuses specifically on landscape painters currently working in Louisiana—many of whom were not included in either previous works. *Expressions* is not an

encyclopedia, catalog, or history of the visual arts, though it does preface contemporary landscape painting with a brief historical context. More important, however, *Expressions of Place* provides readers with individual essays in which the artists themselves, in their own words, give insight as to what they paint, how they paint, where they paint, why they are drawn to the Louisiana landscape, and what they are trying to say in their interpretations of that landscape. In a sense, the artists are speaking to the reader.

Finally, this volume would not have been possible without the enthusiastic and generous support of the artists whose paintings are featured here and the creative staff at the University Press of Mississippi, especially Craig Gill, the press's assistant director and editor in chief. His guidance was invaluable. Most of all, I owe a debt to my wife, Betty, for her gentle nudging and patience.

—John R. Kemp

Contemporary Louisiana Landscape Painters

Ron Bechet—Inner-city New Orleans, south Louisiana coastal regions

Willie Birch—Inner-city New Orleans

Jacqueline Bishop—South Louisiana wetlands

Melissa Bonin—Bayou Teche, south-central Louisiana

Steve Bourgeois—River parishes, south-central Louisiana

Chuck Broussard—Acadian south-central Louisiana

Adrian Deckbar—Southeast Louisiana wetlands

Tanya Firmin Dischler—South-central Louisiana sugarcane fields

Margaret Mays Ellerman—Rural north Louisiana

Alan Flattmann—New Orleans French Quarter

Meghan Fleming—Southwest Louisiana wetlands

Rhea Jones Gary—Baton Rouge and wetlands

Rolland Harve Golden—New Orleans region, north Louisiana delta

Simon Gunning—New Orleans, wetlands, Avery Island, rural and coastal Louisiana

Albino Hinojosa—Northwest Louisiana

Gail Johnson Hood—Tangipahoa and St. Tammany Parishes

Bill Iles—Southwest Louisiana

Libby Johnson—Baton Rouge

Shirley Rabé Masinter—Inner-city New Orleans

Mary Monk—Rural southeast Louisiana, New Orleans

Elemore Morgan Jr.—Prairies of southwest Louisiana

David Noll—Pearl River, Honey Island Swamp

Auseklis Ozols—New Orleans region

Francis X. Pavy—South-central Louisiana

Gaither Troutman Pope—South-central Louisiana wetlands

Mary Louise Porter—Northwest Louisiana, Cane River

George Rodrigue—South Louisiana

Phil Sandusky—New Orleans, southeast Louisiana

Karen Mathison Schmidt—Rural northwest Louisiana

Steven Schneider—Donaldsonville and River parishes

Robert M. Seago Jr.—St. Tammany Parish, Avery Island, sugarcane fields in river parishes

Charles G. Smith—Rural East Baton Rouge and West Feliciana Parishes

Melissa Smith—Coastal Louisiana wetlands, river parishes

Billy Solitario—New Orleans region, coastal marshes of south Louisiana

Allison Stewart—New Orleans area and coastal wetlands

Margie Tate—Central Louisiana

Robert Warrens—South Louisiana and New Orleans

Contemporary Louisiana Landscapes by Region

NEW ORLEANS ENVIRONS

Ron Bechet
Willie Birch
Alan Flattmann
Rolland Harve Golden
Simon Gunning
Shirley Rabé Masinter
Mary Monk
Auseklis Ozols
Phil Sandusky
Billy Solitario
Allison Stewart
Robert Warrens

RURAL AND COASTAL SOUTHEAST LOUISIANA

Jacqueline Bishop
Steve Bourgeois
Adrian Deckbar
Rhea Jones Gary
Rolland Harve Golden
Simon Gunning
Gail Johnson Hood
Libby Johnson
Mary Monk
David Noll
Gaither Troutman Pope
Phil Sandusky
Steven Schneider
Robert M. Seago Jr.
Charles G. Smith
Melissa Smith
Billy Solitario
Allison Stewart
Robert Warrens

RURAL AND COASTAL SOUTH-CENTRAL AND SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA

Ron Bechet
Melissa Bonin
Steve Bourgeois
Chuck Broussard
Tanya Firmin Dischler
Meghan Fleming
Simon Gunning
Bill Iles
Elemore Morgan Jr.
David Noll
Francis X. Pavy
Gaither Troutman Pope
George Rodrigue

CENTRAL AND NORTH LOUISIANA

Margaret Mays Ellerman
Rolland Harve Golden
Albino Hinojosa
Mary Louise Porter
Karen Mathison Schmidt
Margie Tate

Steven Schneider



River Cloud, Donaldsonville, Louisiana, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 26 x 18 inches, collection of the artist.

Photograph of Steven Schneider by Cynthia Schneider.

BORN

Lake Charles, Louisiana, 1955

RESIDENCE

Donaldsonville, Louisiana

LOUISIANA LANDSCAPE LOCATIONS

Louisiana river parishes west bank

INSPIRATION AND INFLUENCES

Vincent van Gogh, Paul Klee, Claude Monet, Elmore Morgan Jr., Gustav Klimt, Wassily Kandinsky, Richard Diebenkorn, Jasper Johns, René Magritte, Edward Hopper, John Singer Sargent, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Winslow Homer

ART TRAINING

University of Louisiana at Lafayette; McNeese State University, Lake Charles, Louisiana

CAREER AND APPROACH TO PAINTING

Donaldsonville artist Steven Schneider has found his art in the land and in the natural and human detritus that drifts up along the south Louisiana banks of the Mississippi River.

In one artist statement he wrote, Schneider said he is “inspired by the natural world and relies on it as a dominant subject.” He describes his creative process as a “trinity of mind, body and soul. Mind involves perceiving the perfect balance and harmony of the color notes as they exist in nature. Body connects with ‘In The Moment Painting,’ compressing time and experience into tangible expression. Soul presents itself in the healing spiritual energy of familiar land shapes.” Schneider often talks of art in terms of music, such as in use of the term *color notes*. In addition to his painting, he plays guitar and mandolin professionally in a bluegrass and folk band and writes music.

Schneider travels the countryside within a thirty-mile radius of Donaldsonville in his truck with his portable easel and acrylic paints. Some days he simply drives around and just observes color and shape relationships. When he does find that right scene and light, he stops his truck, sets up his easel, and paints as quickly and expressively as possible to capture the moment and the light. “I’m attracted to rows and old farm buildings, as well as different cloud shapes,” he said in a 2011 interview with *Louisiana Life* magazine. “I used to paint scenes with no evidence of people. Now I incorporate civilization with rows of crops and buildings. Rows are appealing to an artist as they help with depth perception and create interest through repetition. They can be used to orchestrate how an eye will move across the painting. Sometimes I will incorporate man-made structures to bring the eye back.”¹

His brushstrokes are loose and impressionistic and his palette is bright and intense. “I love the lushness of the landscape,” he explained. “When you are out



painting in mid-July and it's ninety-plus degrees, you can feel the color. It's so intense. It's exhilarating. You feel the scene, you experience it, and you're connected to nature and the creation of the whole situation. You have to Zen your mind to create a painting. I try to capture the essence of what I see and the healing force of nature. You learn to look into the scene, use the energy of complementary colors, and make the color notes more pronounced."

Schneider prefers to paint *en plein air*. "I have to be out there and involved in the process to get a more authentic painting," he contended. "In studio work, you're limited by your surroundings. Outside you have unlimited resources for color variations and experiences. Outside there is an unlimited amount of information I can tap into. Light might change in two hours. You have to interpret it right then. You can't go back the next day."

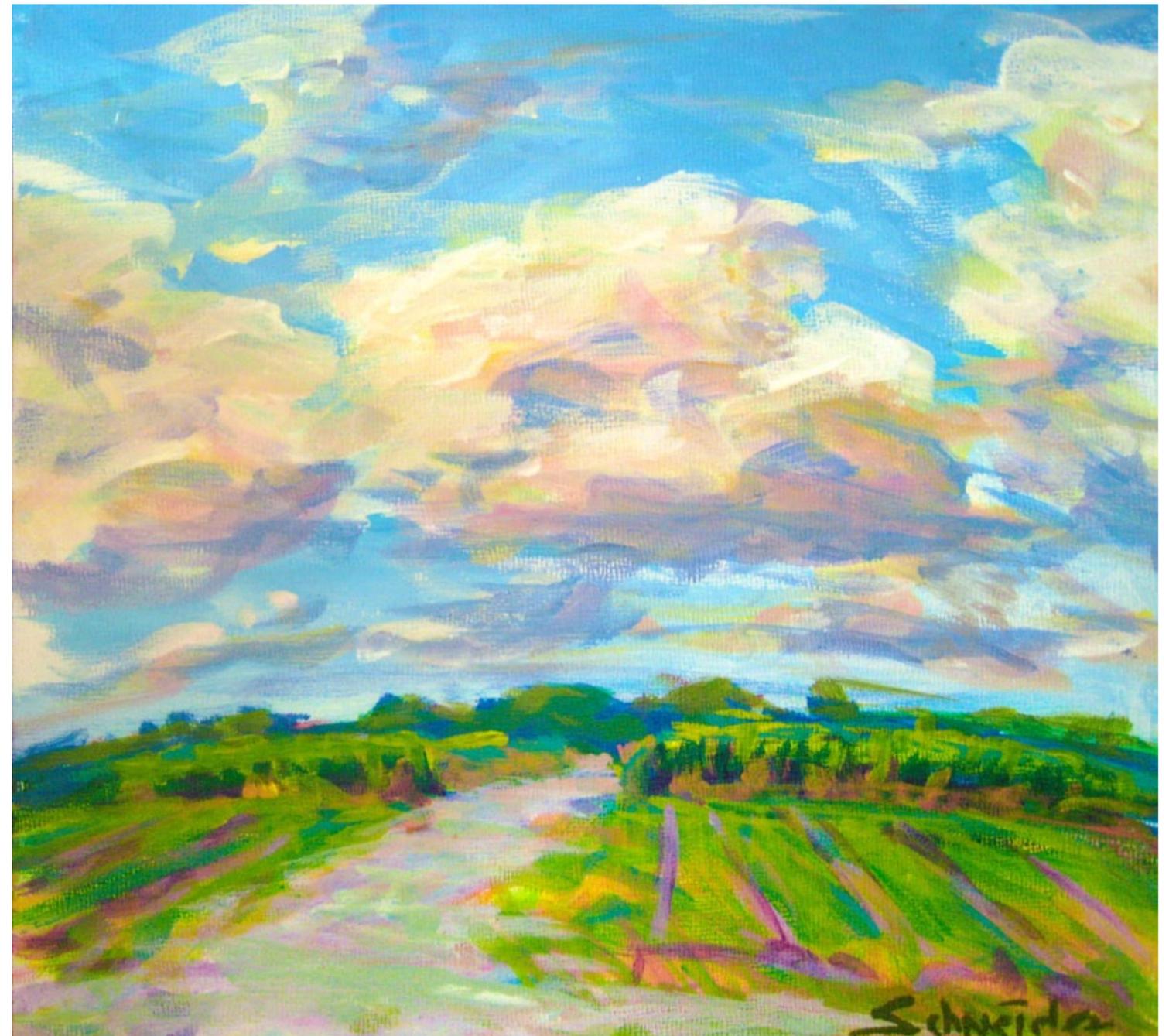
Like many artists, Schneider once painted from photographs taken on location and then brought back to the studio. He no longer paints that way. "The camera has already interpreted the image for you," he explained. "Whereas painting on location allows you to experience the actual color relationships, like luminous shadows that you can't get in photographs. I like to capture the authentic image and that can only be done by painting on location."

In addition to painting, Schneider also constructs three-dimensional icons, titled *RiverSpirits*, from objects he finds along the Mississippi River batture near his home. As in his paintings, his "spirits" are inspired by the same source as his paintings—nature. The message of each piece has a common bond—his journey along the Mississippi River. In building his iconic spirits, Schneider tries different configurations until they satisfy something inside him. "I learned a lot about myself in the creation of the *RiverSpirit* pieces," he said in 2011. "As in life, the process of creation is multidimensional. The *RiverSpirit* icons represent a more complete creative experience because they involve a multitude of mediums and techniques."

The Donaldsonville artist has been on a journey of self-discovery from his childhood home in Lake Charles to his life as an artist in Donaldsonville. He lived in Lafayette in the mid-1970s while attending the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), where he majored in premed and minored in fine arts. After a brief stint at ULL, he returned to Lake Charles to attend McNeese State University, where he studied art. He was back at ULL in 1980 for a degree in zoology and a minor in fine arts. In 1996, after a career in advertising and graphic art, he became a full-time artist.

NOTE

1. This profile, including quotations, except where otherwise noted, is based on the author's interview with the artist for the May/June 2011 issue of *Louisiana Life* magazine.



Cane Road, Donaldsonville, Louisiana, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 8 x 8 inches, private collection.



D'Ville Cane, Donaldsonville, Louisiana,
2010, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 19 inches,
private collection.



Belle Field, Donaldsonville, Louisiana,
2012, acrylic on panel, 60 x 20 inches,
private collection.