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Diane White: Magical Realism

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As the reception for Diane White's "Magical Realism" show begins, the artist stands alone in the middle of the Matthews Gallery's front room, her shoulders squared and her hands clasped together. She looks around at the paintings she's created over the past year and gives a little smile, but her posture doesn't waver. She's ready to greet her visitors.

One of the first folks through the door is Diane's husband Steve, who's just taken a stroll along Canyon Road and has something clutched in his hand. He presents it to Diane and she looks down inquisitively. It's a small grey rock in the shape of a heart.

"Oh, thank you! Oh, that's wonderful," she says, beaming and leaning back to rest for a minute in Steve's arms. "He's my man."

The moment reminds me of Diane's work, which is imbued with equal measures of brave composure and romantic tenderness. The classically trained painter is inspired by magical realism, a literary genre that is rooted in the real world but incorporates magical characters and occurrences. In her impeccably detailed still lifes, glowing flowers hover above ceramic pots and ghostly birds rise from empty nests. The objects' histories unfold around them, at first as subtle as a distant memories and then as vivid as a dreams.

With the heart rock pressed to her chest, Diane answered some questions about her new work, her process and her message:

What drew you to magical realism?

I had a traditional still life that I was working on, and I was struck with the desire to do something else with it. It was steam coming out of a teapot with a dragon on it, and I made the steam into a dragon as well. Larry and Linda went, 'What's that?' And I said, 'Well, it just happened.' That was five or six years ago.

What were you thinking about while you were working on this show?

I don't start with one thought process, I start with one piece that I'm painting and I focus on that. I don't concentrate on a body of work. When you look at my work, they're all very different. Some of them are aggressive with warriors in the background, and others have some angels. I just take it one painting at a time, and try to have them tell a story. Usually it's an uplifting story—a lot of flight, a lot of action.

Several of the paintings show intricate nests. What inspired you to use them in your work?

I have done nests before, but probably not for three years. I have horses now at my farm in Vermont, and I was out in this area with huge pine trees where they hang out when I found a nest that was made of horse hair. It had twigs and things too, but inside I could see the hair of the different horses. I thought, "I have to paint a nest." It was so magical for me to find that.

How do you strike a balance between the real elements in your paintings and the magical ones?

I don't want it to hit people in the face. I don't want it to be Salvador Dali with a melting clock. I want it to be fairly subtle, and maybe something that the person looking at the painting discovers. On second glance you say, "Well, wait a minute. That's not just steam. There's something in there." You kind of get involved with the painting.

Sometimes you paint groups of figures in the backgrounds of your still lifes. Who are they?

They're the warriors in all of us, the strength. There's usually beauty in my paintings—perhaps a flower—and there's strength. I don't make it try to be pretty, but I want it to be strong. They're warriors, and that's what we all have in us, this strength.