

MED SCHOOL

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Medrie McPhee became my Art Doctor in 2002, when we were both teaching classes at Bard College. Medrie had been teaching—and painting—for longer than I had, and on the two-hour drives we shared from the city to the school we would compare notes on shows we had seen that week and she would give me advice: how to structure a painting class, what kinds of projects to assign. Probably because her advice was so good, we began trading studio visits. An early studio of mine she visited was in Gowanus, across from what used to be the Dodgers Stadium; it was possible to see her, looking wiry and boyishly elegant in the raglan-sleeved baseball tees she preferred, as having just come from a game. Medrie's readiness was impressive: "On a scale of 1 to 10," she would say, "how tough do you want it?" (I usually opted for 7 or 8, never doubting she was capable of 10.) She is an uncanny diagnostician. It's almost supernatural how quickly, how adroitly she can point out a painting's problem. A color that's too "keyed up," as she puts it. A corner that looks neglected. An area that should recede but is stubbornly seeking attention. Medrie is a formalist with a careful, intelligent eye; she knows what a painting needs to bring it into harmony with itself. Sometimes she recommends a surgery that feels too invasive, even scary. But she is inevitably correct.

The first studio I visited of Med's was above a bakery in a tenement building in Chinatown. I bought pork buns and coffee and walked up the narrow stairs to the second floor where Medrie and her husband, Harold, lived and worked. In the modest front room overlooking the Bowery, Med pulled out a series of large and mid-sized paintings. They depicted what looked like the remains of buildings that had fallen apart or been demolished. Things suspended in space, strange piles of architecture rendered in flat milky colors. A vision of awkward elegance.

To watch the unfolding of this vision has been hugely satisfying. Content, for Medrie, has swelled and swelled and swallowed the canvas whole. Now instead of abstracted buildings we see complete abstraction that has the rigor and enormity of great architecture, without any of the pomp. Med's materials are as modest as her handling of material is brilliant, the collaged pieces of fabric demonstrating the textural possibilities of flatness while avoiding the dread morass of paint marks. Her new works can seem anatomical or maplike, depending on their (or the viewer's?) orientation. Sometimes informed by the clothing they are cut from, for instance a splayed leg or sleeve, the interior shapes often have two aspects: the flatter middle and the raised, lumpy edge. Paint floats above, occasionally ignoring the boundaries suggested by the seams and creating a gestaltist or cloudlike shape, like a shadow on sunlit fields.

Progress takes an immense amount of work, work that is done in the belief that there is somewhere only you can go. The payoff is discovering something new in the very personal problems you create for yourself. Medrie's work, however, is too smart to insist on its newness. Her paintings show how exciting deliberation can be.