



artist profile

SANTA FE, NM

# Darlene Olivia McElroy

by barbara **d**elaney

"The beauty of art is that we can read our own story into a piece."



Photos by Clarice Lighton



"Angel" • 24" × 24"

"Things aren't often as they appear. Sweet and innocent may hide a feral side. Sometimes we get so wrapped up looking at the exterior package that we miss the soul."

Opposite Page: "Abundance" • 24" × 24"

"While the peasants ate cake, she dressed up in her finery and jewels to eat out-of-season fruit."

**m**ixed-media artist Darlene McElroy's rich Hispanic ancestry fuels her creative mind and her artistic pursuits. As a young girl, Darlene spent many summers with her relatives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, listening, learning, and enjoying the colorful surroundings. Storytelling was a big part of the experience, and once she was back home in Southern California, she would often illustrate the tales from her memory in pencil and crayons on her bedroom walls—her first canvas.

Declaring herself a narrative artist, she says her pieces always tell a story. Sometimes the story is as simple as a color story. Occasionally, there is no readily apparent story and it isn't until the piece is complete—or maybe even later—that the story is revealed. Darlene admits that sometimes the story changes as time passes. Upon further inspection of a piece, shadows become apparent, images are noticed, colors collide, and a different story emerges than the one that came to mind before. Further, she acknowledges that the viewer brings

his/her own experiences to the canvas and thus “the story” may change again and become their story.

Darlene has always made a living doing something that had to do with art. Trained in fine art and illustration, she worked as an award-winning commercial illustrator. Although family and friends always admired her work, she never considered pursuing art as a full-time career until she took part in an art show at a friend’s suggestion. Having always created art for her own enjoyment, she had a number of pieces on hand, and it turned out that she was the only artist who sold anything—several things—that day. She knew she was on to something.

She says inspiration comes to her in a variety of ways—a word, an image, a color—and she sets to work with no particular plan. She chose mixed-media art as her focus because she didn’t want to be locked into one category, i.e., oils or watercolor. Rather she wanted to be free to play and experiment and create with a variety of media, combining them as they came to inspire her.

Like many artists, Darlene doesn’t like a blank white canvas, so she starts by blocking in color, creating in a very stream-of-consciousness way. She uses many thin layers to complete the piece: paint, imagery, glazes, collage, more paint, more imagery, sanding, stenciling, image transfers, etc. Her paintings always start out abstract and it is during this process that the story often appears.

“It’s like a puzzle slowly revealing the image, or like reading Turkish coffee grounds, where the story is revealed only by the combination of thousands of small vignettes,” she says.

Darlene finds she is drawn to houses, elements of houses, and images of people as she works. She uses a



“Floating in Time” • 20 " x 20"

“Time seems to float—it stops when you are not. It goes too fast when you are occupied.”



“Citrus Muse” • 24" x 24"

“Over time the artist’s studio has been idealized with the nude model/muse and the jars of old paintbrushes, but perhaps the real muse of the moment is nothing but an orange?”

number of everyday items like keys and cages and ribbons symbolically in her work. A lot of her pieces have to do with the human condition—searching for completion, fear, feelings of being trapped, inner angst, etc., and these ordinary items help to trigger thoughts and tell the story.

Though she usually works in warm colors, Darlene says she goes through stages. Sometimes her work is in monotones; other times it's very colorful.

In addition to her paintings, Darlene constructs detailed assemblages. Again, layers come into play.

"When someone sees a piece of mine, I don't want them to immediately know how I made it. I want to have all of the visual interest in layers."

Her ongoing search for interesting items, which she calls "mining found objects," necessitated an 8' x 10' shed in her yard that's filled with interesting wood and metal pieces, including architectural elements. A lot of her found objects appear mysteriously on her doorstep and friends, family, and other artists often send stuff her way as well. She said she tries to go through her shed every summer and has found that doing so usually sparks eight to 10 new pieces of art.

Darlene works in her studio every day and says she is most creative in the morning, often beginning work as she enjoys her first cup of coffee, which is often around 4:30 a.m. so she accomplishes a lot. Working in a studio with large windows that fill the room with sunlight, she usually has five to six pieces going at one time—mostly due to the drying time required for the various media she uses—and she switches back and forth between painting and assemblage. But don't expect to find her in her studio late in the day; she says she is "no good" after 4:00 p.m.

Teaching is a very important part of Darlene's life. She thinks that "people shouldn't be stingy with information." Darlene's blog, Queen of Glue, chronicles her art adventures and offers ideas and tutorials, too. Her goal is to impart as much of her knowledge and experience to others as she can, whether in the classroom or online. She truly wants everyone to do the best they can. She believes, as she once read, that "it takes 10,000 hours to find yourself in art," and she is happy to help other artists along this path.

Darlene said she considers her art successful when "I learned something new in the process, when I can go no further with the piece, and when it elicits a response from the viewer."

She shares her techniques and experiments in three books co-authored with Sandra Duran Wilson. Their newest book, MIXED-MEDIA REVOLUTION: CREATIVE IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES FOR REUSING YOUR ART, is available now. ●

[darleneoliviamcelroy.com](http://darleneoliviamcelroy.com)



"Flight" • 14" x 7"

"How interesting it is that people cage themselves in when the door to freedom/change is open and they possess the key. Is it the mind or eyes that are closed?"



"Bird in Hand"  
12" x 12"

"We all have something we hold close whether it is our love of music, a lucky item, the memory of a past boyfriend or something else."