

Virginia Sharkey

THE
COLOR
OF
MUSIC

By Peggy Templer



Gisela Linder photo.

Virginia Sharkey is a native mid-Westerner who had absolutely no doubt from the age of five that she was an artist. Arts in Ohio and Indiana public schools were highly valued and she was designated the classroom “artist” and “writer.” By the 9th grade she was performing violin in a college orchestra, and had won first prize in the national Scholastic Magazine Writing Competition for her poetic essay about the magic of orchestral playing.

Virginia went off to Vassar College as a de facto studio art major. The college did not then offer a studio art major so she declared English instead, writing a poetry book for her thesis though she practically “lived in the studio.” Inspired by a teacher, New York painter Rosemary Beck, she learned how to see abstract art. For her last three years her mentor was the acerbic, highly political mytho-poetic social realist painter Alton Pickens, whose work was the polar opposite of Sharkey’s lyrical abstract bent. Pickens encouraged Virginia to go to New York City after graduation, and her first loft was a sublet from poet Denise Levertov with whom she shared anti-Viet Nam war activism. “At that time I felt very estranged from the art world,” she says. “Minimalism was touted and it left me cold.” Nevertheless, she painted, immersed in the great museum paintings and conversation of other artists, Peter Gofinopoulos in particular. After nine years in New York, she received a grant and was able to travel to Europe. At her exhibition and talk at Vassar she had met Ezra Pound’s grandson, who invited her to the family castle Brunnenburg in the Italian Alps, where she was inspired by the sublime mountain scenery and the Pound tradition. When returning to New York City at the grant’s end, “Everything was just grey. I had to leave.”

This feeling and a romantic partnership led her to Mendocino County, where she has maintained a studio ever since, first living with her husband off the grid on the McNab ranch near Hopland and later on the coast. Living on a 20-acre former sheep ranch was a little inconvenient,” she says. “I remember calling my gallerist at the phone in a



Top: Dawn, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 33".

Bottom: Dusk, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 33".

mailbox three miles up a dirt road from the house and opening the mailbox lid, feeling its cold fog drip run down my arm. His wife said he was in the shower; could I call back in 20 minutes? NO!”

Living in Mendocino County, “It’s inevitable that my work is earthier, less cerebral,” she says, “but I have always been interested in the essential and elemental, which living in nature enhances. I even ventured off into a few jogs into quasi-representation; for example, the series of a dozen dogs I painted of my retriever’s face in various combinations, something quite crude, rather primitive. And then the monumentality of Yosemite struck me, so for a while I worked on abstracted variations of waterfalls.” These paintings were awarded one of the top prizes each year she entered the Yosemite Renaissance Exhibition at the Yosemite Museum.

Her paintings, either acrylics or oil, are large, vibrant, and expansive. She prefers the large scale, being “interested in a deep space, you could call it symphonic. I try to convey a realm like music with its openings and structure of something ineffable.” Having practiced meditation for over 45 years she has also experienced a kind of spacial inner realm:

“The elements of color and line are merely tools for me. I’m not interested in making clever compositional arrangements, I want to actually have the work present meaning, to affect an experience. My intention is existential: I try to convey the quality of being, as it is felt in a crystalized presence of memory and time, like that prehistoric fly caught in amber – a kind of suspended musical color tone. I love suggestion and ambiguity, the emerging and coalescing, something imminent and mysterious, and the power of deep time and space. I try to summon the essence of an emotion or deeply felt experience and transmute it onto canvas until it coalesces into a familiarity that strums a chord for me.”

As those on the coast may know, Virginia regularly performs as violinist in the Symphony of the Redwoods, the Mendocino Music Festival and various chamber groups as well as teaching violin, all per the advice Rosemary Beck once gave in an oracular manner: “If one is to be a painter, then one should have a trade – like rug weaving!”

Her recent investigations concern the idea of time: the seasons, the times of day, and the days themselves. Recent poems are for the first time progenitors for her *Days* series (see Poetry, page 48), each painting roughly aligned to its poem. She was chosen last June as one of 28 artists entrants included in the Chautauqua Institution’s National Exhibition in New York and honored that her painting *Monday* was awarded the prestigious Bellringer prize, the top award of the exhibition.

Artists who inspired her in particular are Peter Brueghel, Goya, and “Matisse, above all.”

Virginia Sharkey’s work can be seen on her website at virginiaSharkey.com, or the Partners Gallery website partnersgallery.com. During the month of October, she will have a Main Gallery exhibit at the Mendocino Art Center, with an opening reception on October 14.



Top: Sunday, acrylic on linen over panel, 50" x 52".

Middle: Tuesday, acrylic on linen over panel, 50" x 52".

Bottom: Traces, acrylic on linen over panel, 50" x 52".