

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

IN LATE 2012, ARTIST RB MCGRATH DISCOVERED THAT SOMETHING HAD BEEN STOLEN FROM HER SMALL JACKSONVILLE GALLERY. IN THE YEARS THAT HAVE FOLLOWED, HER PLIGHT HAS ATTRACTED NO SHORTAGE OF MEDIA COVERAGE, A DOCUMENTARY AND THE CONTINUED ATTENTION OF THE NOW-LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR. WHETHER ANYTHING HAS CHANGED IN THE YEARS SINCE, HOWEVER, IS ENTIRELY SUBJECT TO DEBATE.

The music idling and ebbing and filling the spacious room wasn't violin. It was cello. Cello and orchestra. And as the music rose and fell, you could see that it was having an impact on the artist, who was sitting in the dark, illuminated by just one light, the music's quickening pace accelerating her movements within the light's narrow sphere. A votive candle blushing pink was set deep in the room. And circling with their cameras in a softly padding step were two young men, silently making their way around the room, careful to avoid the other's shot, in a spookily choreographed pantomime of filmmaking as they held their lenses at varying lengths from the older woman and her canvas.

They watched as she opened tubes of paint with a red-handled pair of pliers and fluttered her fingers over the many brushes within her reach. You could hear them shuffling between the tracks of music. And when the refrigerator

and the heater weren't droning in the background, you could hear the rasp of the artist's measured breathing through her nose—somewhat high-pitched, not quite labored, but almost. For more than an hour, the filmmakers stood on stools, set their cameras on casters propped up by DVDs taken from her shelves, considered and then decided against shots through the grillwork of a nearby cabinet—always focused on her, however, and the work she was doing.

In truth, there was nothing particularly special about the canvas. It was a still life in the beginning stages. There was the amber-hued outline of a bottle and some obliquely shaped things clustered around the base. On a stand to the left of the easel, there was an empty glass, along with a bottle of wine, some purple grapes at the base and an urn with a ruffled lip casting a shadow on the cloth. And as the music played and the woman painted and the



BY JORDAN P. HICKEY

young men charted their often stilted course around her to document the moment, it was difficult not to think the entire thing a little surreal—not in the artistic sense, but surreal to consider all the moments that had led to this one. Why two filmmakers and a reporter had been drawn to this studio-slash-hair salon off a side road in Jacksonville, just a stone's throw from the railroad tracks. Why there had been television crews that had lit up the place with their cameras. Why the lieutenant governor had taken such an enduring interest, and who, because of his advocacy for her, seemed to have a presence even when he was nowhere to be seen.

In part, the reason for all of this lay in a battered instrument case atop a cabinet, its latches choked and cobwebbed and busted. And it had to do with a painting framed in the next room, a still life of a violin, which the artist had completed nearly a decade before, much in the same way she was painting the still life this evening. But of course, the violin had a story. It was a painting that had, in all likelihood, been seen all across the world. And it was for that reason the artist was asking \$1.5 million for it. Negotiable.

Winding up Arkansas 161 from Little Rock toward Jacksonville, you pass along a stretch of things and places that seem at a glance to be broken. It's a place where the good times seem to have run their course some time before, and it's in the thick of this that you find the gallery whose windows advertise haircuts in a pink and white script, and whose proximity to the tracks make it a sounding board for the clockwork passing of trains at all hours of the day. Set along the wide single-floor facade, there are two doors. One door leads into the gallery, and another into an adjoining salon. In the salon, there are paintings of locomotives and still lifes, and there's a yellow ceramic jar of Oreos for her younger clients.

And all of this is important because what you see—what first meets the eye, what's on

STILL LIFE OF VIOLIN, RB MCGRATH, 2006



the surface—is but a fraction of what's there and a fraction of the story. Because all of it suggests a portrait of the artist as you'd expect her to be, an artist barely making ends meets, who smokes long, slim cigarettes from a gold-colored Saratoga box and lives and works and breathes in the space.

Because on the surface, everything is always as it seems. A violin is always a violin. A self-portrait always a self-portrait. An imitation of the Mona Lisa done in full is always that and nothing more, and is paired with all the baggage and assumptions that such a thing is bound to bring with it. A gallery housed in a hair salon in a largely forgotten and shut-

tered part of town is always that—except when it's not.

And it's a place where you won't understand a thing if you don't ask questions. And when you begin to do so, you start to realize there's a reason such a place exists that might not have otherwise been apparent. Take, for example, the sprawling mural of some Northeastern coast that spans one entire wall in the salon. She'd painted it over the course of three months, back when she first moved into the space a decade and a half before, and had asked her clients what they wanted to see in it. And so there are sailboats, sea gulls and a yellow rain slicker that hangs on a nail by the

door. Her landlord's airplane floats in the blue sky. The smudges of rocks are where she taught younger clients to use a pallet knife.

Inside the gallery, all of her work tells a story—a print of a portrait of Bill Clinton (the original now hangs in front of his office in the Clinton Presidential Center), a series of portraits of other artists whom she met and collaborated with over the Internet (more on that in a moment)—but none more complex and fascinating than the story of the artist herself. After leaving her adopted hometown of Jacksonville at 19 (she'd moved there from her native Newfoundland five years before), she struck out for Hollywood to seek her fortune as an actress, only to find herself at the end of it with little to show for the experience but an enduring sense of disillusionment and a dog named Woofgang Amadeus Mozart.

After a series of moves from coast to coast, with scarcely a dime to her name, she eventually, and rather inexplicably, wound up back in Jacksonville, where she earned enough money waitressing and cutting hair (both of which she'd picked up out west) that she was able to own her own salon in the mid '90s. As a means of passing the time between clients (and something she figured she might be able to make a living from after she was no longer able to stand behind the chair), she started painting.

But of course, in some ways, what meets the eye on the surface conveys all the meaning that it needs to convey—say, the sound of a train passing just outside the door—because as the artist says, this place is not the easiest one to gain exposure for her art.

“Well, it dawned on me one day that because I was in Jacksonville, Arkansas, it was going to be very, very difficult to get my name out there—as far as my art goes,” she says. “And then I realized that the Internet might be my ticket.”

Which is how, at the tail end of the millennium, she came to rely on the Internet as a means of getting her art out there. And as the years went by, she started to take high-resolution photographs of her work and started to work with companies that would license her work and, based on what they sold, would provide her with royalties from those online sales. Which brings us to the violin.

For all intents and purposes, it's not unlike any other violin, and surely other artists have answered similar compulsions to capture and represent the instrument in similar ways. Set behind the only slack red-velvet rope in the rear of the gallery, the painting has a warmth to it, and it's not altogether difficult to imagine framed prints of the work hanging in the homes of musicians, large blown-up versions on the walls of high school orchestra halls and smaller versions tacked up in practice rooms all over the world. Yet it never seemed to sell. It was supposed to be the piece that gained her notoriety, that lifted her and her work out of relative obscurity. It was a piece, she felt, with the potential for universal appeal.

And then one night in late 2012, after typing “Still Life of Violin” into

Google, she found her image staring back at her as one of the top search results. After scrolling down a few lines, she saw it again. A few more lines, and there it was again. And then she got to the seventh line on the page and saw that her painting had some logo emblazoned across it. And it was in that moment she realized her work had been seen all across the globe—all without her knowing.

If you've ever wondered what happens when a small-town artist with limited funds at her disposal realizes that her work has been pirated by Chinese wall-art manufacturers and her image, with even her signature intact at the bottom right corner of the frame, is used to sell the knock-offs, it goes something like this. First, she reaches out to lawyers who inform her that, in order to bring a case against the manufacturers, she needs to file a case in the Chinese court. They also tell her that it will be very expensive, and even if she did win—which would likely be the case—there'd no guarantee that she'd even get enough from the Chinese government to cover her lawyer's fees. In other words, the lawyers tell her that they can't take the case on commission but that maybe she should write letters to the offending companies—the manufacturers, the advertisers. And so she does.

She writes letters that begin, with some variation, “My name is Roberta Bonham McGrath.” She tells them that they are advertising a product—her product—which is being promoted, advertised and produced in violation of her intellectual property rights and copyright. She demands \$100,000 in compensation for the violation and the removal of the image from the website.

She never hears back (though the one offending company with ties to the United States, which would allow her to bring a case against it in the U.S. court, does remove her image from the company's website). She assumes a fake name and reaches out to the manufacturer herself. They tell her, “Yes, we could make the BGSL0075 - Violin in canvas prints. In order to offer you the best price, could you tell me the size of your demands or other request? We would do our best to fulfill your demands!” And then they say that she can choose from seven sizes of the piece on a cotton canvas, ranging from 12 by 16 inches for \$1.06 up to 36 by 48 inches for \$6.75. Or, if she'd prefer, she could go with the largest they offer, a 48-by-72-inch version for \$11.98. She researches the company and finds they could feasibly produce between 5,000 and 30,000 reproductions monthly. Although she can't know for certain—they might have made a million in counterfeit sales; they might have sold just one print—she uses those figures to estimate how many times her painting has been duplicated. (Eventually, she'll assign the work a price tag of \$1.5 million, negotiable.)

She contacts the local media, and a television crew comes in and does a segment on her in November 2012. She reaches out to officials up and down the totem pole, before finally hearing from her congressman, Tim Griffin. There's another story from the television station, on KARK-TV Channel 4, and it includes footage of Congressman Griffin saying, “It's

THE RIGHTS STUFF: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY & CHINA

Although plagiarism and forgery can likely be traced back just about as far as there's been original thought, the past few decades have seen considerable infringement of intellectual property rights with the advent of the Internet and an increasingly interconnected world—especially when it comes to China and the U.S. Although a rather gross oversimplification, the following timeline lays out some of the milestones reached between the two countries in this arena:

7.7.1979

An agreement on Trade Relations is reached between China and the U.S., providing for “reciprocal property rights” for both.

3.3.1980

China accedes to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Convention.

5.26.1991

The U.S. designates China a “Priority Foreign Country” for failure to provide “adequate and effective protection to intellectual property rights.”

7.10.1992

China accedes to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works.

1.1994

Walt Disney Co. v. Beijing Youngsters and Children Publishing House marks the first time a copyright case in China involved a U.S. party. (Disney was awarded the equivalent of \$27,000.)



a huge problem, and Ms. McGrath is a person who's feeling the impact personally, and she's also seen that there's no easy way to stop it." And he arranges for her to have a conference call with several officials based in Washington, D.C.—and one based in China—in late March 2013, when she's told, in so many words, that the onus for change is on her shoulders.

And then she hangs up, returns to what she'd been doing, and everything stays the same.

And then one day in May 2013, she gets a message on Facebook from a young man whose hair she used to cut when he was in seventh and eighth grades, saying that he's been following her story, and would she be interested in working on a documentary? She says yes, and then it starts again.

“Brace yourself,” RB says.

The filmmakers, Keith Hudson and his partner, Minh Pham, have taken a break from filming, and as they're figuring out how much space is left on the memory cards on this evening in July 2014 (Keith says he's shot some 24 gigabytes worth of footage), RB is talking about the gradually building music of Dvorak's "Concerto in B Minor," performed by Yo Yo Ma, coming through the speakers of the small boombox midway between her easel and the door to her studio.

"He's going to play one note, ... and when the orchestra comes in, this is going to blow you out of your seat," she says. "The ending on this is just so riveting. That's another reason I wanted to stop. When I'm working, I've got to stop whatever I'm doing and listen to it. It's almost like it's personal to me. It's almost like it's quietly losing ground, and it's getting quieter and quieter, and all of a sudden, the wind comes. And you're ready to go after the world."

As she'll mention much later down the road, the constant brick walls that she'd faced in shedding light on the challenges she's run up against had left her overwhelmed. When Keith reached out to her on Facebook, it was as if new life had been breathed through her. And as production on the film continues—they've already done interviews with everyone from Jacksonville Mayor Gary Fletcher to then-Congressman Griffin to then-Gov. Mike Beebe—she seems practically ecstatic as she talks about the music.

"You can almost visualize him doing this," she whispers, as Ma plays the high C above C, the music building. "Here it comes." As the music reaches the climax, she brings her

hand into the air, gradually lifting upward with the music. "Wow!" she exclaims and throws her hands down, inadvertently ashing her cigarette. "WOW. Isn't that magnificent? Did that not give you goose bumps?"

After he's finished checking his camera, Keith says, "Dude. I got some really great stuff. A lot of great stuff."

"Do you want me to save this to paint more on, or do you want me to go ahead and finish it up?" RB asks, "or near completion so you can shoot again?"

"I think this is a good stopping point," he says, "because I'm about to max out on cards, and I'm on my last battery. That way, I can come back full-fledged. I'll bring a laptop."

After they decide to leave the painting where it stands for the moment so Keith can document the entire process, RB asks him, "Did you see how much the music affects me when I paint?"

"Yeah, absolutely."

"There was a rhythm to it," she says. "No distractions, no nothing. Just the darkness. And I try and set that atmosphere that they set, the old masters. ... Of course, I'm never going to be one of the masters, but I like to create an atmosphere, and I like to channel them, so to speak—try to feel how they felt with what they were doing."

There's something more to the room, though. Looking around the studio, there's something telling in the details—the stack of sketchpads atop the grumbling refrigerator; the books on art and its practice; the aged, coffee-colored slips of paper outlining colors for flesh tones and backgrounds, about brush sizes; the "Stradivarius" in a worn case atop her cabinet that had been the model for the violin, (and, ironically, a knock-off itself). There are printed-out articles with titles like "12 Step Path to More Satisfying Artworks," by Herschel M. Hermann, whose steps include "6. Painting in medium darks and leaving the whites" and "10. Details. Discretion is golden." And perhaps most intriguing, there's a printout—cut out, sans serif—of a quote that reads:

*"See something that no one else sees
develope [sic] an approach
do it in a way that no one else does it."*

Even after you leave, it's a place that one can't help but return to often—to those images that were captured on film that illumine a life given to art and the frustrations and

THE RIGHTS STUFF:

1995

The U.S. and China agree to Memorandum of Understanding, which "among other things, required China to reduce piracy, improve enforcement and open its markets for U.S. computer software, sound recordings, and movies."

12.11.2001

China accedes to the World Trade Organization.

4.2007

The U.S. files a WTO complaint against China. (The WTO will side with the U.S. in 2009 but will find that more evidence is needed "in order to conclude that actual thresholds for prosecution in China's criminal law are so high as to allow commercial-scale counterfeiting and piracy to occur without the possibility of criminal prosecution.")

5.2011

The U.S. International Trade Commission releases a report estimating that U.S. firms reported losses of \$48.2 billion in "sales, royalties or license fees due to IPR infringement in China" in 2009

8.2014

China announces that it will open three specialized courts focused on intellectual property. The first, in Beijing, would begin operation in November 2014.

contradictions of a struggle with the world that won't yield. Thinking about all this, it becomes a little easier to guess at the reasons why, in listening to the hours of interviews, the main points of the story that she repeats from time to time have acquired a cadence and rhythm that maintain consistency throughout the months. ("It would have to be filed in the Chinese language, in a Chinese court, according to Chinese law.") As if the breath marks have been marked in.

And you have to wonder if perhaps there's a reason for that, if by relegating those recaps and explanations to some place where everything is rote and practiced, she's managed to keep them at bay—in some part of the mind where we assign such things, where they can be left to languish and held at a remove from conscious and volatile thought. And you have to wonder what would happen if, at some point, the story came to end.

Just shy of a year later, on May 31, 2015, RB sees a car pull up in front of the gallery. She goes to the door, and a little boy and girl enter with their mother. RB walks them into the salon and, standing behind the little girl in front of the full-length mirror, asks how much she wants off.

"The whole thing," the girl says.

"You just want a trim?" RB asks the girl and her mother.

"I'd say ... just a couple inches," her mother says from the counter, before explaining that apparently the little girl had taken it upon herself to do her bangs.

"OK, well, let me straighten that out then," RB says, "because you took a big chunk out of it."

"Yeah, she did," says her mother. "And believe me, that's not the first time. She done it when she was younger, too."

"I did that when I was your age, too," RB says to the little girl.

"I did not," says the little girl. "I didn't do it with scissors because my mom would find out, so I did it with toenail clippers."

"Oh, my God," says RB.

"That's why it looks like that," her mother says.

Over the course of the past year, it seems that very little has varied between then and now. Yes, there have been some things that have changed. There are a few new works in the gallery. Perhaps most notably, a few months before she was invited to the lieutenant governor's office, where he stood on an intern's desk, hammer in hand, adjusting a framed picture that she'd done of monks throwing snowballs beside the brick wall of an abbey (on extended loan, and very much not a gift, it ought to be noted). Progress on the documentary seems to have stalled as Keith has finished up his last semester of school at University of Central Arkansas, though RB says she'd spoken with him a few days before.

But still, I find myself wanting to ask the same questions that I had put to her before: where things stand and how she feels about her work, and what it's been like to see another year slip by with little if any movement forward.

It's not a few minutes into our conversation after she's finished the haircuts that she says she's learned quite a lot this past year, and that her attitude toward her art and how she approaches it has changed following the ordeal with *Still Life of Violin*.

"You start thinking, 'OK, what do I want to do from here on out?' I figure I've got a good 30 or 40 years left—despite this," she says, making a

gesture to the cigarette she holds between her fingers. "Yeah, I think I'm seeing more now what's important to me in relation to my art."

"What's important?" I ask.

"Painting for myself and pleasing myself," she says, "and searching for my own voice in my work." She pauses. "I don't think I have a voice yet. I think a lot of what I've been producing is knowledge that's been stuck in my brain from things that I have learned over the years, but I didn't create myself. I want to do something that ... I want to find my own voice that's different from what anybody does. Or greater.

"I just want to totally devote my entire everything about me to my work as a painter, but in order to do that, I have to be stable—financially. So that's one of my goals right now—that's one reason why I pursued this the way that I pursued it," motioning to the manila folder full of email correspondences, the unanswered letters to the foreign companies, her copyright on *Violin* and so forth.

"And I have to divide myself on a daily basis right now—between *that* (motioning to the hair salon) and *this* (her art), and I have to keep that going in order to keep this going," she says. "So it draws a lot of energy out of me that I could devote to my art because I have to be behind that chair. I have to keep the rent paid; I have to pay those bills. And when you're in business, especially a small-business person like I am, no matter how well you do something and how consistent you are in following what you need to in order to keep going, you are still at the mercy of outside forces, everything from the economy to competition, and ... you're at the mercy of all of that, so you don't have complete control over [the business]."

"[But] I will have complete control over my art. Period," she says. Given the experience she's had over the course of the past three years—when the essence of her work and its reproduction have been yanked from her hands—it's not hard to imagine her reasoning. "It's as simple as that. I've given up control on [the hair business] to keep it going. I will not give up my control of this. It *will* be my way. Eventually. But this new thing I've started, from this point on, I'm never putting one of my paintings on the Internet again."

Just behind her, you can see the violin. Nothing has changed there, either. And again, I find myself wanting to know how she now feels about the entire experience, if she really feels as though the time after she discovered the theft—particularly that first year when she devoted herself entirely to the effort of finding an answer—was really "lost," as she seems to think it now.

"Yeah," she says, "because it was so overwhelming that it was emotionally and physically exhausting—mostly emotionally exhausting, because I kept hitting one. Brick. Wall. After another. First, I discovered, you know, in dealing with the politicians, they're not even going to talk to you in an election period. They don't have time for constituents during elections. Second of all, even when I did get talked to, they weren't able to do anything. It just never ceases to amaze me that this went all the way to a congressman's office and launched an inquiry—but nothing can be done. Nothing. So I hit that brick wall. I hit a brick wall with the media. Of course, they lose interest in 20 minutes after they've done a story.

"So I was a little bit rejuvenated about ... about nine or 10 months later when I got a Facebook message from Hudson, who was really interested in the story and said, 'Hey, let's make a film.' And I thought to

myself, this could keep it going. This could get the word out there even more. This could make it bigger and bring even more attention to it, and maybe it'll attract somebody who can do something, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So I got excited again, and then

that's been going on for a year and a half, and I'm kind of like, O-K," she says, laughing. "You know what I'm saying. So, yeah, there's the emotional tiring; it just wears you down."

After a brief tangent about politicians and lawyers and the sorts of people who say they'll try to help but either won't or can't, she comes back to Keith, who she says is the one exception to the rule—who, as she says, "is genuinely interested in this story and interested in making it public."

"So, that's great, but ... I don't know what will happen from it, so I just don't know," she says, "and I have to be patient and wait because he's the one who's making the film. I don't know what's going on in his mind. He knows what direction he's taking. So when he told me what he told me a couple of weeks ago—about how this is turning into a bigger project, and how when it premieres, it's going to rejuvenate the interest in this whole thing—then that's great. That's something to look forward to.

"But in the meantime, I've got to keep cutting hair, listening to trains, 89 of them a day, and keep myself in canvas and paints and just keep painting. But I am going to take that new approach now to my work—nothing else is going on the Internet."

It's just after 10 p.m. on a sticky-hot night in mid-June, and standing in a room that's still being put together is Keith, who's just finished his double shift at a restaurant in downtown Little Rock. He's spent the past few days unloading his things into the room after moving out of his parents' place in Jacksonville, a process which has, at times, gone less than smoothly (like when his mattress parachuted onto the highway, and he had to run back and retrieve it). Most everything is in that stage where things are sifting down, finding their respective places in a new space. A small blue trash bin is filled with rolled-up poster-size photos that show a sprawling, cloud-chocked mountain vista from Rocky Mountain National Park, a portrait of a former professor he took when he was still a student. And then, atop the mantel, there's a violin. A painting of a violin.

It shows just the lower left-hand quarter of a



violin, most of it out of frame. It's darker, more brooding than the one hanging in RB's studio. Half the canvas is coated in black. Some of the black lines along its reddish body aren't quite connected. There's a mottled shadow at the base. It's lit in such a way that it seems as though some unseen lamp is casting light from some corner of the room and sending shadows from the strings across the base of the body.

Keith takes the painting down and walks around a square wooden table. There's just one light in the room, and he holds the painting so that it catches the light and is a little easier to see. The painting almost seems to be not quite dry in one place, though it was painted sometime this past fall.

"I almost think that it's the dark side of the first painting," he says, holding the artwork against his waist. On the back of the work, in the top left quadrant of the canvas frame, there's an inscription written in pencil in a seemingly rushed hand. It reads:

Still Life of Violin II
RB McGrath
2014

It's rather difficult to believe that it's been a year since Keith and Minh moved around RB in the dark and shot the footage. However, in speaking with Keith, it becomes apparent that it's not as though the project has been forgotten. Far from it, really. Although he's recently been occupied with finishing his schoolwork,

working on other projects and so forth, the reason for the delay is because of how the scope of the story has changed. As he says, in the past year, the story that started as an idea for a 45-minute film about RB has gradually shifted to where it is now—to this point, where it's so much larger.

Although much of what the coming months will bring is still up in the air—a trip abroad may be in the making, though details are still getting worked out—to speak with him about how he views the project, notably how encouraging it's been for him to watch RB deal with this for so long without tarnishing her work, it seems likely the project will continue. That the pieces of the whole will continue to come together. Which, in a sense, has been something of a moral throughout the duration of the project.

As he'd said during a brief conversation a few days before, he imagines the story as a big quilt, with many of the squares already

filled in and sewn together. "But there are, like, four or five empty spots left," he says, "and as time has passed, there have been more opportunities for there to be another square. And interestingly enough, it always ends up being someone from outside of the spectrum. And I always find that fascinating. And that's the effect of her artwork on other people. ... It's brought an interesting conglomerate of people together—like you, like me, who are very much supportive of her. And I think that's what makes the story rich. That's what makes her artwork rich—because it's brought people together."

A few days later, I think about this as I watch a rough cut of the teaser trailer that Keith has sent over. There's the votive candle and RB painting with a single lamp casting a sphere of light on her and canvas. And as it runs for its 2 minutes and 18 seconds, there are familiar faces of Beebe and Griffin, familiar images of her gallery and salon, the mural with its lighthouse and rain slicker hung by the door. There's the violin, seen from below, and the camera zooms in. And in watching and re-watching the teaser, as time and again, I watch as RB outlines the urn, the glass, the fruit—a series of movements and brushstrokes captured and immortalized in that footage they shot more than a year before—I think back to those moments when the filmmakers watched as she painted that still life. And as the image pans out and away, I think about her. She is her own image. It's not still life. It's her. **AL**