

ASHEVILLE MADE

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A Big Plot Twist In Margaret Curtis' Narrative

by Tom Kerr



Pink Stripe

In October, Tryon-based artist Margaret Curtis was honored by the Joan Mitchell Foundation with a prestigious Joan Mitchell Fellowship. The Foundation describes the new award — an enhanced, multi-year version of a previous grant — as recognition for “important contributions to artistic and cultural discourse deserving of greater recognition on a national level.” Only 166 artists were invited to apply for the 2021 Fellowship, and

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Curtis was one of 15 chosen.

“I can’t believe it happened,” says the Tryon-based painter. “You can’t just apply for it; you have to first be nominated. I was just grateful to know that someone on the national stage likes my work enough to submit my nomination. That was enough for me. It’s doubly exciting because the vast majority of recipients are from big cities like New York and LA. It’s extraordinary to me that you could work from Polk County [NC] and be seen by these folks.”

Joan Mitchell was an influential, pioneering member of America’s postwar Abstract Expressionism movement, and the foundation that bears her name is devoted to giving artists “the agency needed to sustain a lifelong studio practice.” Not only does the award provide substantial financial support, but it also offers immediate access to a wide range of programs, services, and consultations that help working artists in practical and creative ways.



The Ice Sculpture

As Curtis explains, “The award is not a one-off thing. The Foundation wants to support and invest in their artists for the long haul. I will definitely put it to good use. It means I don’t have to do lots of side work and apply for grants, which take so much time. I don’t have to worry about the pressure of trying to afford to buy art supplies. A lot of extraneous concerns and anxieties have been taken off my back so I can just focus on making the best work I can, which is what’s more important to me.”



Curtis' immediate reaction when the Foundation called to notify her of the award was shock — and tears. Once she regained her composure, she jumped into her truck and went looking for a larger studio space, which she found close to home. “I’ve been painting on half of an old closed-in porch, and my larger paintings pretty much span the entire width of it. It’s a struggle. But I want to scale up substantially to work on more complex narratives, and now I can. I’ve already done preliminary sketches.”

Curtis' career has, in some respects, come full circle. As an emerging NYC artist, she was featured in Marcia Tucker's 1994 *Bad Girls* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art. But around the time that her big-city acclaim and popularity peaked, she left New York and moved to Western North Carolina to prioritize her role as a parent, caring for an infant who had health concerns at the time.

“The fellowship award has sort of helped me put my two lives back together,” Curtis says, “leading life as a parent and being an artist. Somehow being recognized by this organization makes it more of a seamless whole. The emotional aspect is really wonderful and reaffirming. I’m on cloud nine.”

Margaret Curtis, Tryon, margaretcurtisart.com Curtis is represented locally by **Tracey Morgan Gallery** (188 Coxe Ave. on the South Slope in Asheville, traceymorgangallery.com). Curtis' show at **Jonathan Ferrara Gallery** in New Orleans runs until Dec. 11, and she has a solo show at the **Florence County Museum** (Florence, SC) opening in February. To learn more about the Joan Mitchell Foundation Fellowship award, see joan-mitchellfoundation.org.

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