

# Ryan Russell – Painting and Pick’in

## Artist Finds Meaning In Regional Sights And Sounds

Whether painting on canvas or picking the banjo, artist Ryan Russell finds artistic adventure and musical satisfaction in Rockbridge County. Fellow artist Agnes Carrey recently asked him about his new inspirations, Goshen Pass, summer vegetables from his garden, and banjo tunes.

### How did you get started on your newest work, painting the rocks at Goshen Pass on the Maury River?

“My earliest experience of Goshen Pass was in 1985 when my friends from Rockbridge Baths took me swimming in Goshen at Indian Pool: it struck me as the “poor man’s grand canyon.” As we were cooking corn, hotdogs and hamburgers in a fire pit next to the river, I remember looking up and noticing rock strata, and the beauty of light on the water and the rocks: it looked like a worthy subject but I couldn’t imagine how to paint it! It took another 25 years before I actually set up an easel.”

### How did you approach such a vast subject?

“My initial impression was a romantic one: I was hoping to convey the sense of awe and uplift that one feels at the vast beauty of the pass. The huge gap where the river cut across the mountain made me think of the idealized landscapes of American artists John Kensett and Sanford Gifford of the Hudson River School.

Their paintings emphasize color and atmosphere and present nature as contemplative.

Goshen is a magnificent physical space that is easily accessed. I began painting there during June of 2010, after the glory of high water had abated. When the water was low it was more of a bone yard: it seemed an accident of nature as to where those rocks found their resting positions. The boulder field was strewn with the wreckage of floods, a sort of nature’s version of the roman forum. Standing amidst this ruin of nature, I

felt the resulting wornness, weathering and cracking where boulders had wacked one another in the violence of the water.

After this, my approach became more pragmatic than romantic. Through daily painting sessions and repeated study, the rocks began to take on personalities. Within that chaotic looking environment I sorted out the individual components, and painted the features and shapes of the prominent rocks, almost as one would paint the portraits of individuals.”

### What connects Goshen to another subject you like to paint – vegetables from your garden?

“I harvested my onions in September and they sat on the window sill for a number of days. Then one day I saw in a flash, a painting, after passing it by many times: golden onions on a blue green plate. I was seeing the beauty of the commonplace everyday object and the potential for

painting it. In this way, I enjoy finding poetry and order in the randomness. Like the rocks at Goshen Pass, the vegetables are strewn across the table: each has a unique position and character: I organize and find true relationships in that which seems arbitrary.”

### Why does it occur to you to paint one thing and not another?

“When searching for a subject, I remember my father, before he wrote a book, said that in the process of researching, it was the stuff happening on the periphery that ultimately led to the biggest discoveries, not the original subject.

Often, for me too, a subject that has been overlooked for a long time can become a source of inspiration and lead down an intricate path.

The post-impressionist artists Bonnard and Matisse found subjects in the commonplace: such as painting the table after they had eaten.”

### How does your interest in music and the banjo relate to your painting?

“Music is probably my antidote to the solitary nature of my existence as a professional artist. In 1990, Frank’s Sandwich Shop was my first exposure to local musicians.

At that time my musical roots on banjo were based on bluegrass and old time models. But in the past few years I’ve also played folk, blues, rock and original compositions by friends.”

### How does banjo borrow from your philosophy in painting?

“On banjo, I build a repertoire of “licks” and apply them ultimately in some intuitive way to define and embellish a melody. In painting, passages of color and brushstrokes embellish an overall composition.

My end goal in each discipline is to put out into the world something authentic and personal and hope that it resonates with others.”



RYAN RUSSELL paints onsite in Goshen Pass, creating one of his new works that are on display this month at Studio Eleven. AT TOP, Russell plays the banjo in his studio, surrounded by some of his works. “Music is probably my antidote to the solitary nature of my existence as a professional artist,” says Russell.

### Russell Paintings At Studio Eleven

Ryan Russell’s new paintings of Goshen Pass and other subjects will be featured at Studio Eleven Gallery at 11 S. Jefferson St. in Lexington

The exhibition opens on Friday, Dec. 6, with a reception from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. and runs through Dec. 21.

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