

Derry artist's work on display in Harrisburg

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For The Bulletin

Many people who see Richard McWherter's art ask, "Is that a photograph or is that a painting, or is it something in between?" The answer is yes.

McWherter, of Derry, takes photographs and paints on them digitally, turning them into hybrid works of art that are getting recognition in juried shows in the region and on the state level. One is hanging until Sept. 14 in the 47th Annual Art of the State exhibit at the State Museum of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg. Others were recently included in shows at the Hoyt Institute in New Castle, Sweetwater Center for the Arts in Sewickley, the Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh and at the International Juried Photography Show at the Carter House Gallery in Redding, California.

He had three pieces last month in the Westmoreland Art Nationals that hung at the Westmoreland County Community College in Youngwood. Another is in the current exhibit at the Westmoreland County Arts & Heritage Festival that's being held through Sunday at Twin Lakes Park in Hempfield Township.

McWherter has been an artist for nearly 40 years and was awarded a scholarship to attend the Governor's School of Arts when he was 15. The winning entry was a series of photographs of street scenes.

He was a professional photographer for a number of years, worked for *The Bulletin* in 1975 and 1976, owned his own business and did freelance photography. He changed careers to teach art at Derry Area High School, all the while continuing his interest in photography.

"I've been in and out of shows, but I was an artist who liked to be in my studio and wasn't interested in showing," he said. "I've been showing more frequently in the last six or seven years."

Most of his photos are nature and landscapes and are taken in Westmoreland County, other parts of western Pennsylvania, and in Clearfield County where he owns some property. He also takes photos when he travels and has been showing several from Muirs Woods National Park near San Francisco, California. The coastal redwoods there are some of the largest trees in the world. His photo of exposed roots is called "Reach."

"The stark contrast between black and white is kind of eye catching," he said. That's the one hanging at the state museum in Harrisburg, and another print of it is at the festival at Twin Lakes Park. McWherter had three pieces in the show at the community college. That includes a color photo taken at Muirs Woods, a traditional photograph of the forest ground in autumn at Forbes Forest outside of Ligonier, and a swamp scene in South Carolina. A photograph called "Night Breeze," taken last fall outside the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, was in the Three Rivers Arts Festival.

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Derry

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McWherter experimented with processes, techniques and manipulating photos in the darkroom before digital photography became popular.

"I went digital around 2001 when I picked up a camera that was as good as my film camera, and I never picked up film again after that," he said.

For the most part, darkrooms have been replaced by computers and software programs that enable photographers to do more manipulation than possible in trays of chemicals, and to do it much faster. Now a photographer can accomplish layering, adjust the lighting and manipulate colors with a click of a mouse.

Some people debate

whether photography is an art, McWherter said, especially since it's so easy for anyone to take pictures with their cell phones.

"People think of art as something that takes hours and hours to do, and that it takes paint brushes," he said. "But then you pull out a book that says the art of photography, and it is an art. Photography has been around 150-plus years, and it surprises me that that argument is still out there. It really is an art. I think of myself as an artist first. I'm not just making photographs."

One of his pieces, "Carolina Morning," was purchased as part of the student owned collection at Greater Latrobe Junior High School.

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Richard McWherter of Derry has been selected as one of this year's exhibiting artists at the State Museum of Pennsylvania's Annual Art of the State show in Harrisburg this summer. His black-and-white photograph titled "Reach" received one of this year's Purchase Awards at the annual show. In the right photo, presenting one of the State Museum's Purchase Awards for 2014 to McWherter is Pennsylvania First Lady Susan Corbett, who also helped select the work that the museum would buy. Corbett chairs the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and is a member of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. McWherter's artwork will now become part of the museum's permanent collection and will be on extended display as part of the museum's public exhibition.