

## 15 MINUTES

## A portrait of the artist as an older woman

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In 1991, when Mary Richey was a mere 62 years old, she was leaving Duluth, Minn. on a 35-foot Bristol sailboat with her husband, bound for Fort Myers.

"By gum, we went sailing and we had a good time," she said, flashing a broad smile. "When we were traveling I only did water colors because it's cramped. Can you imagine on a small boat, oil paints? No way."

Richey, who turns 77 years old on Thursday, Sept. 27, is a pretty blend of whites and blues, golds and silvers - white hair and a gold necklace, silver spectacles and dark blue earrings complementing an icy blue pair of eyes.

She stood in the empty, bright room at The Art League of Fort Myers, a small gallery filled with local artists work, in downtown, on Monroe Street, last Friday.

"You know, a lot of times the days go by and nothing happens," she said, looking out the big window where a palm tree swayed lazily and the afternoon sun glinted off parked cars.

She was "gallery sitting," she said, and no one had stopped by in hours.

Richey recently finished a painting of her own that she said just might be her masterpiece. It was an emotional and multi-faceted work, she said, an oil painting tied up in the health of her husband, in fires burning in the forests of Minnesota near where she once canoed, and in rebirth. It is a painting that might, in some ways, inadvertently reflect the inner life of the artist.

"I feel more alive when I'm painting then I do at any other time," Richey said.

Her possible masterpiece is a picture of a burned landscape.

"It was about the black, black, dirty smoke, and all the ashes that are left," she said. "It's about the bits of green beginning to come up through the ash. Nature will recover, if you give it a chance."

Richey said Diego Velázquez, a 16th century Spanish painter, is one of her many favorites, because, "his paintings are so exciting."

She opened a book to a page with a painting by Diego and set the book on a table by the window, in the light. The painting is called Las Meninas (The Maids of Honor).

"This is the little Spanish princess," she said, pointing to an angelic girl in the center of the painting, lit by a beam of light.

"And these two are dwarfs. These are ladies in waiting. Over here is Velázquez and in the mirror -- that is the king and queen of Spain."

She also pointed out a painting she didn't care for, by Jean-Honore Fragonard, a 17th century French artist.

"It's too sweet, too fruity," she said. "It's a little like whipped cream."

Then she flipped to a painting by Franz



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Mary Richey at her home in South Fort Myers, standing next to her untitled painting of a burned landscape.

Marc - 19th century German Expressionist - called The Fate of the Animals, a violent and angular work.

"I like that," she whispered, awed.

Richey grew up in Toledo, Ohio and received her masters in art from the University of Wisconsin at Superior. She also taught.

"That was a long time ago," she said dismissively.

And now?

"There is the part of me that does the garden, the part of me that works on the house, the part of me that writes letters to my grandchildren, the part of me involved with my church - but after all those things are swept away, you have painting," she said, sending that last word through a long, low tunnel of breath. ■

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