



Tanya Dischler

Memories of a burning landscape | BY JOHN R. KEMP

PABLO PICASSO once said a “painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions.” For Mandeville artist Tanya Dischler, painting “is an emotional journey of highs and lows, happy and sad, excitement and disappointment. It keeps pushing me to go beyond. It allows me to paint emotions and feelings.”

During the past 20 years or so, the award-winning artist has lived and painted in Old Mandeville about a block from Lake Pontchartrain. Her airy studio sits to the rear of her century-old side-hall cottage, facing a deep yard and an ancient gnarled oak. But like most residents of Mandeville and rapidly growing St. Tammany Parish, Dischler is from somewhere

else. She was born Tanya Firmin in St. Mary Parish in south-central Louisiana and grew up with her mother, father, brother and sister on a sugar cane plantation on Bayou Sale at the end of Louisiana Highway 317 where the land meets coastal marshes and the Gulf of Mexico. Her father, Miller Firmin Sr., was born in Avoyelles Parish, and her

mother, Miriam Peltier, grew up along Bayou Teche.

“I have so many fond memories of growing up in Bayou Sale,” Dischler says. “My daddy and maternal grandfather were sugar cane farmers. My grandparents lived in ‘the big house,’ called Ellerslie Plantation. Aunts, uncles and lots of first cousins lived around it. Eventually, my mother and

father bought their own place about a mile down the road. With so many cousins, we were never without someone to play with. The cane fields were our playgrounds. Whether the cane was tall and thick or cut and burned, we played from sunup to sundown. As I got older, I used to love to ride my horse through the fields. They became a racetrack with my cousins, racing to see who could kick up the most dust. That is also where my sister taught me how to drive.”

All of that changed on June 27, 1957, when Hurricane Audrey slammed across the Louisiana-Texas border, destroying towns, homes and lives. Hit hard by the storm with half of the cane crop destroyed, Dischler’s father and mother quit farming and bought a grocery store nearby. Tanya was 8 years old. A couple of years later, they built a grocery next door to their home in Bayou Sale. “It was right next door to our house, which we thought was so

cool,” she recalls. “There was a big boom of drilling and oil and gas production going on down there. All of a sudden, the store was popular and a very busy spot. It reminds me of the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*. Of course, the locals and relatives hung out there all the time – the stories my mother used to tell me!” Six years later, when Dischler was 14, the family moved to nearby Franklin while her father continued to run the grocery in Bayou Sale and lease out the cane fields to other growers. The property remains in the family to this day.

Memories of those days have shaped her life and art. Although her maternal grandmother and mother were artistic, she was not “encouraged to be an artist. I was just a free spirit with the curiosity of a cat and a wild imagination, running around half-naked in the cane fields making up play-like games.”

But perhaps inevitably, art found her, first as a hobby while she was

working in various sales jobs in South Louisiana. Later came marriage and a family. “When I decided to become a stay-at-home mom after having my boys,” she explains, “that’s when my life really started to change. I took a couple of art workshops in the Lafayette area, and that was the beginning. The fire was lit.” She went on to study art at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now the University of Louisiana–Lafayette, and Louisiana Tech University in Ruston.

Over the years, Dischler has developed a unique and signature painting style as she explores the natural landscape of South Louisiana. Her paintings of wispy, chevron-winged snowy egrets and blue herons, pelicans on wing, the natural flora and the spectral images of angels are lush, graceful and elegant. But equally important, they are an implied spiritual journey in nature. “When I’m painting,” she says,

“it’s a form of meditation. It’s spiritual. I love nature, especially in Louisiana. Once I get involved in painting, everything goes away. I get answers to problems. You cannot look at birds, at the color and even this oak tree outside and not believe in God. It’s awesome. I feel it while I’m painting.”

Yet it was in the cane fields surrounding her home where young Dischler developed, in Picasso’s words, her “feelings and visions” of the South Louisiana landscape. These memories began to rise in Dischler’s imagination and paintings in April 2011, shortly before her mother’s death the following September. Since then, they have intensified.

“After my mother’s recent death,” she says, as her eyes slowly move from one painting to another, “childhood memories came to the surface. One day after finishing up a long day of painting in the studio and not wanting to waste paint still on my palette, I pulled

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out a piece of watercolor paper, and I started brushing on the leftover paint without thinking but simply responding to the colors that were there. Time flew. At what point did I think, 'Hey, I'm painting burning cane'? I really don't know. Somewhere in the depths of my soul, these memories worked their way to the surface onto small pieces of paper, and I fell in love with them. When I am totally involved in the process, my mind goes to a place where I am just responding to what's in front of me."

When Dischler is painting these streams of memories, her imagination is back there in the fields or watching planters burn off the stubble and debris after the cane is harvested. "I'm outside under the willow tree," she says. "I see the cane. I smell it. I feel the heat. The smoke is thick. I'm 4 years old again. I'm happy. I'm excited and free. The cane is so tall. Where is my sister? Hiding in the cane, I'm sure. We hear the tractor and run out in our pajamas for a quick ride with our daddy. He stops, and we climb on board. Carter [a hired hand] is working with the mule-drawn plow. I

hitch a ride with him. What a thrill! We climb to the top of the cane that's waiting to go to the mill. I honestly don't think my sister and I wore anything except white cotton underwear until we went to school. What freedom! How can I put this into my painting? How can I share a part of me that's not been seen? I listen with the heart of a child. I wait and see what happens."

Even today when she returns to St. Mary Parish during the burning season, she stops her car, gets out and lets her imagination

return to those earlier years and rise with the gauzy veils of smoke: "I smell it. I hear it crackling. The smoke is thick. The sky is filled with huge clouds and is a brilliant blue. I close my eyes and breathe it in. I'm looking back and looking forward at the same time. By looking back at my childhood, it's pushing me forward to explore and express other possibilities through my art. Who knows where it will take me? I don't. I just follow the feelings and emotions. I have to. I miss my mother." She points to a small cloud hovering in one

corner of a painting. "That one little cloud," she says, "is my mother. She's still meddling." Dischler smiles.

"Art," she explains, "has been the one constant thing that stays with me. It has helped me maintain a positive attitude and stay true to myself. Marriage, birth, divorce, death – life changes, and we change with it whether we want it or not. My faith in God has gotten me to where I am today." That "constant" has been quite a journey.

Dischler's paintings can be found in numerous private and public collections, and she has participated in scores of solo and juried group shows, including an invitational at the Louisiana Governor's Mansion in 2010. Her work can be seen at Rue Cou Cou gallery in Baton Rouge and in Mandeville at The Louisiana Artists Gallery, Just Picture It gallery or at her Beyond the Bayou Studio by appointment. Also, visit www.tanyadischler.com. ■

