

An Interview with Bryn Craig

By Jessica Robles

Jessica Robles: *What inspires you?*

Bryn Craig: *A lot of the time it's the places that inspire me. I travel a lot. Wednesday I'm going to Greece, and I'll take my watercolors and do some things there, and then come back and do them in oils.*

JR: *So you do your work in watercolor first.*

BC: *Yes. I work from watercolors I've done, or photographs.*

JR: *Did you always want to be an artist?*

BC: *Oh yeah. I've been an artist forever, since first grade when my teacher said to my parents, he'll be an artist some day. I'm not good at anything else.*

JR: *What is one of your latest projects?*

BC: *I've been working on a series of porches. This one is like a porch in New Orleans. This one is like Hawaii. I have a bunch of them. All porches, from different places.*

JR: *Could you give me just some quick background information about yourself?*

BC: *Sure. Out of high school I went to school in Philadelphia. In six months I was drafted by the army. I worked in San Francisco at Young and Rubicam. I've lived in San Francisco for 20 years. 13 years ago I took an early retirement.*

JR: *So this is your studio then?*

BC: *Yes. The studio is perfect. It was added on to the house. It's not just a room I use for a studio; it was actually built as a studio. It has a high ceiling so I can work in big pieces. It's the perfect room. I don't have to clean it. And there's this door here to let the paint fumes out.*

JR: *So you generally use oils. Why do you prefer oil?*

BC: *Well, I don't like acrylics. They don't have the same feel. Acrylics are safer, no bad fumes. I like the tactile feel of oils, the gooiness. A lot don't like it because it dries slowly, but that's why I like it, because I can go back and work on it some more before it dries.*

JR: *What kind of things do you paint?*

BC: *I paint scenes from around here, houses and landscapes. I did some sketches of this beach house. I did one painting, then I thought, why not do two? I did it in watercolor first. The woman who commissioned me was nice enough to send me there.*

JR: *Why do you do this? What about painting makes it the only thing you want to do?*

BC: *I love it. Even if my work was never shown or put up in a gallery, if no one ever saw it or bought anything, I'd still be painting.*

JR: *You said you were inspired by places, and you travel a lot. Where do you usually travel? How often?*

BC: *I take trips every couple weeks, usually to places like Malibu, or Stinson Beach.*

JR: *How long does it take you to finish a piece?*

BC: *It takes me roughly three weeks to finish a piece because I like to leave it alone and come back to it, so I can see it with a fresh eye. That's why I usually have several projects going on at once.*

JR: *How do you evaluate how successful a painting is?*

BC: *When someone says "it looks like the place" I know I got across what I wanted.*

JR: *What is your goal with painting? What are you trying to do?*

BC: *I really try to catch the atmosphere of the place. I go painting with other people sometimes and there's this one woman who likes to paint the same tree in every picture. But I like to get that particular tree that's actually there. Once I went to Manchester and stayed two nights at a bed and breakfast. One morning I sat my stuff up outside to do some painting, and this guy, he owned the bed and breakfast, saw me and said "what the hell are you doing?" Then he saw what I was painting and he bought it, and it paid for the whole weekend.*

JR: *How do you transport your materials?*

BC: *I have this little carry case. It's got legs built into it. And this is the little table and the stool. It's very convenient. This is what I'll be taking to Greece.*

JR: *Do you plan paintings? It seems more like an in-the-moment process.*

BC: *I have no preconceptions. When I see something, I just do it. My wife is very patient--she'll go shopping or something and come back later.*

JR: *How often do you work?*

BC: *I paint every day, for at least a couple to six hours. Eventually I do get tired of sketching. I spend an amazing amount of time spending it in preparation.*

JR: *What is your work environment like? Do you need quiet, without distraction?*

BC: *I definitely don't work in silence. I always have the radio on, and during football season I'll be watching TV too. I'm not easily distracted. It's perfect down here. Here's another one of the porches, a hacienda.*

JR: *Are you satisfied with the popularity of your work?*

BC: *Yes, I'd say so. I showed 15 paintings at a gallery once and it sold out.*

JR: *Your work seems pretty realistic. What kind of style are you using?*

BC: *I'm a realist, but not a photorealist. I'll do a painting from a photograph, but maybe the grass is out of focus, or the palms aren't what I want them to be. I just use photographs, I don't copy them. I'll take a photo of something during the day, and when I paint it I'll make it night. I decide which window is lit and all that. I invent freely. Once I moved a whole railroad in a painting. It's kind of playing God. Here's a kayak rental place in Hawaii. I keep all my photographs.*

JR: *Have you had other jobs?*

BC: *I worked in advertising. I did commercials. But there are so many compromises in that business. The guy paying wants his say. With my painting, no one tells me what to do.*

JR: *And it seems like you are still able to live comfortably, since you can travel so much.*

BC: *Commercials were profitable, so I was lucky to be able to retire early, with a full pension, but this kind of work can be nervous sometimes, because you don't get regular paychecks and that can be scary.*

JR: *Do you have different methods for different projects?*

BC: *I work big in oils, because they are wet and bulky. I do watercolors first because of that too. Once I was going straight to oils outside and this big wind blew the canvas over and it got covered in pine needles.*

JR: *Have you ever been published?*

BC: *I was featured in a book on how to do oils.*

JR: *This one looks more abstract than the rest of your paintings. What other styles are you interested in?*

BC: *I almost never do abstracts. But here is one I did, of a bug. It's a big painting. There are a lot of streams in my paintings. I got very interested in streams for a while, the way they ripple if you throw in a pebble, and I started to think about what it would be like if you were the water. So I painted this other one imagining that's what you'd be seeing. I also did these whirligigs for a while. I do my woodworking on the deck. Sawdust doesn't go well with oils, and not with my wife either. I did this pawn boat, but the grandkids demolished part of it so it needs to be redone.*

JR: *What are some current things you're doing?*

BC: *I'm about to enter a show in the east bay. I'm showing stuff in two different galleries now, and each sells about two to three paintings per year. I have to try to get more galleries. If I have five to six I'm showing in, then I'm doing okay.*

JR: *You mentioned that you like the freedom of painting.*

BC: *I love being able to travel. There's no discipline about it. I'd hate going to an office. Oh, Here's another good example of how I change things. This is a hotel in LA. There was no drain there, no car there in the parking lot, no light in that window. When something's missing in a scene, I just help it out.*

JR: *You said you've been drawing since you were a little. How did that get started? How did it develop into a career?*

BC: *As a kid I drew a lot. It naturally evolved into other things. My mom would paint Sunday mornings. She was a painter. At school I was really encouraged. No one but me was allowed to use the chalk. In high school I illustrated the yearbook. When I went to art school I had very good painting instructors. I taught a little bit myself but I didn't like it. It was frustrating when people couldn't do what I wanted or would be goofing around and weren't trying. I only did two sessions, six weeks each.*

JR: *What directions do you see your art going in the future?*

BC: *I think in the future I'll be doing more of the same. There's nothing I'd rather do. I'd like to show in more galleries. I'm not talking to someone in Carmel and after I get back from Greece I'm going to try to get some things together for him. There have been some pretty hard times now for galleries. It's all been slow. I'm still painting a lot. If the stuff sells, that's good too.*

JR: *Is there anything about painting you don't like as much?*

BC: *I love everything but the fumes. It's a way to observe, and I like the non-committee nature of it, the singleness. It doesn't always work, but I destroy very little. Especially with oils, it's hard to mess up because you can keep working on it for years if you want. I'll just lean something against the wall and come back to it months later. But you can't do that with watercolors, so I destroy more of those. Having been in TV commercials, as an art director, I have found that one thing that is marvelous about painting is I do what I want to do, when and where I want to do it, whereas in commercials, they decide. It's an opposite situation. It's fabulous.*

JR: *How long will you be in Greece?*

BC: *I'll be gone in Greece for three weeks. I'll be back October 2. I've been there before, but never to my wife's father's island.*

JR: *Is there anyone who has influenced your work?*

BC: *One of my influences is Edward Hopper. I like what he paints about. I like the mood of the place; it's a kind of poetry. He really captures that place, at that time. That's what I try to do. I go to a lot of different places. I go to LA, to dingy Hollywood, and paint a Mercedes. Or in New Mexico, like this one, where people are just overwhelmed by the sun and power of the location, here. And then in Ireland, it's really overcast, and there's all this gray sky and lush vegetation. What I like is getting the smell of a place, which Hopper did. British Columbia is beautiful: there's all this mist and water, mountains and clouds.*