



# A PAINTER WITH A VIEW

Roanoke artist Nan Mahone Wellborn wants you to see and feel what she creates.



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PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS

**N**an Mahone Wellborn unlatches the heavy gate and winds her way up a picturesque path to a quirky two-room cottage perched atop a South Roanoke hill.

She comes to this white-walled, light-filled corner on days when she's not fording streams or hiking stony knobs.

But before she steps through the wide door, she stops and lifts her head of wiry curls to admire the scene before her — mountain peaks in the distance and sunlight dancing on rooftops nearby.

"I love a long view," she says.

These mountains, these streets, it's a scene Wellborn has spied since childhood. But these days, her vista is more than her simple surroundings. It's her inspiration, her passion, the essence of all she does.

In the 20 years since she moved back to the very neighborhood where she grew up, Wellborn has become a master of oil and canvas, of shadow and light.

She's become a beloved local painter whose brightly colored works hang in homes, galleries, even the offices of the Virginia General Assembly in Richmond. They've been exhibited in museums, splashed across the sides of city buses and graced the covers of garden club journals.

Wellborn, 61, has become a mainstay of Roanoke's popular Open Studios artists tour, having exhibited in the show for the last decade and stepped up to co-lead it for the last two years.

She's also become an advocate for land conservation, appreciating more than most how open spaces feed creativity, beauty, inner peace.

"We've got water quality and soil quality to preserve. But you've also got view shed," she explains in her shin-length denim painting apron, a spark of passion glinting from her tortoise-shell framed eyes.

But if a view is where Wellborn begins, it's what she does with it that has earned her acclaim.

More than a straight depiction of a landscape, Wellborn's art aims to turn a two-dimensional rendering of the natural world into a living, breathing, sensing moment.

"I want to take you there," she explains. "I want you to feel like your feet are in the river."



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Nan Mahone Wellborn's studio is located in a space above a garage in South Roanoke.



**Tools of her trade:** Wellborn uses a variety of palette knives when she paints.



**She also keeps a hat and boots near the door, ready for her next trip outside.**





## OUTSIDE CONNECTION

To hear Wellborn tell it, she had an idyllic childhood. Her family kept chickens and a goat — on Avenham Avenue in the heart of South Roanoke, in the '60s. Cousins lived nearby. She visited often with her maternal grandmother and uncle, who ran an apple orchard in Botetourt County. She spent summers in Rockbridge and Bath counties hiking, creeking, bird watching, exploring.

All of it served to connect her to nature in such a foundational way that years later, living among the concrete and high rises of cities, she would find herself restless and out of sorts.

"I would feel like I needed to get some distance," she remembers.

Wellborn's mother, Nancy Hopkins Mahone, was an award-winning flower arranger and a painter in her own right. Wellborn credits her mother with teaching her to find her paintings in the world rather than creating them from her imagination.

"My mother was an observational painter, as am I," she says.

Wellborn studied art at Mary Baldwin College, where she became skilled at practicing her craft outside — en plein air.

After graduating, she opened a studio and followed an interest in fabric design, eventually creating large-scale batik silks for the fashion industry.

Then, like so many Roanokers before her and since, Wellborn left family and home, striking out for someplace bigger.

She stopped in Richmond to study interior design, then found her way to New York, where she managed designers and contractors for toy giant FAO Schwarz. She landed in Charleston, South Carolina, where she worked for iconic mayor Joseph Riley to help transform the then-sleepy Southern city into the booming tourist and foodie destination it is today.

By 1996, she had married and moved again, and when the chance arose for her neuropsychologist husband, Bill Wellborn, to land a job with what was then Carilion Health Systems, the couple took it.

Wellborn returned to family and familiarity. And she reconnected with her artist community, largely centered at the Beverly Street Studio School in Staunton.

"I pulled out the paints," she says, "and that got me going."

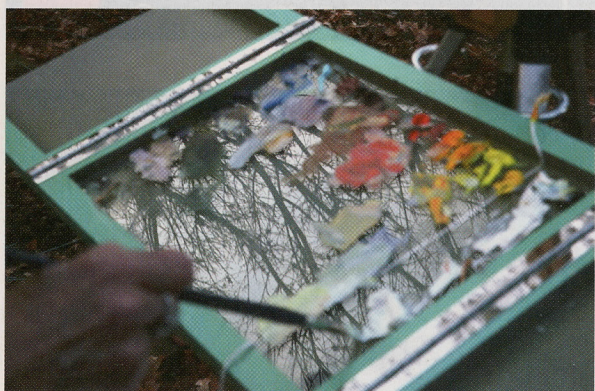


**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Wellborn's connection to nature and time spent outside can be seen in her paintings, including this one of a horse in the meadow.

A selection of paint brushes are neatly stored for easy access in Wellborn's studio.

Wellborn became interested in painting outside — en plein air — while a student at Mary Baldwin College.





**COUNTER CLOCKWISE:** One of Wellborn's paintings is a commissioned portrait of a pet. She and husband Bill are dog lovers.

While Wellborn has lived in metropolitan areas, she returned to Southwest Virginia and her beloved mountains in 1996.

Wellborn creates a palette on glass to reflect the environment in which she is working.



Though she was painting only part time, Wellborn's art began attracting notice. In 2004, she became one of a dozen artists collaborating in an at-that-time newly-created downtown retail and exhibit space, The Market Gallery. By 2006, she'd joined a group of 30 artists who came together each spring to open their work spaces and display their art, known as Open Studios of Roanoke.

In those same years, Wellborn met a new neighbor, Becky Ellis, whose family was close to fabled Russian artist George Solonevich and his Finnish wife, Inga. Ellis introduced the artists, and Wellborn credits Inga Solonevich with becoming a major influence and inspiration.

"To be able to bring two artists together and watch them converse about their passion is just so exciting," says Ellis, who has followed Wellborn's career ever since and has five of Wellborn's paintings hanging in her home.

By the beginning of 2009, Wellborn had traded in her office space at The Roanoke Times, where she worked as marketing director, for days now shaped by land and weather and sunlight. For weeks at a time in spring, summer and fall, she would load up her Toyota Highlander with canvas and paint and her jerry-rigged portable easel. She would hike to her destination, don her signature crumpled cowboy hat and settle in, creating until the light changed too dramatically or the cows circled too close or the day came to an end.

"Observation and a view have always been a part of my life," says Wellborn. "All of these different experiences just help me see more clearly."

## LIGHTING AND LEARNING

To visit Wellborn's nest of a studio is to tour the forgotten valleys and favorite peaks and secluded river banks across western Virginia.

Her canvases — started, half-finished, set aside — hang from every vertical space in her aerie. There are horses grazing at the base of a mountain, pools reflecting faded barns, fields of bright flowers, flame orange trees, shadowy nooks.

Wellborn's work largely focuses on beloved places she returns to over and over: the Cowpasture and Bullpasture rivers that flow from Highland County through Bath and Botetourt before connecting with the Jackson River to form the James; a cottage in Nelson County; vistas along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

"I enjoy going out and seeing how the light's different, getting a different angle, going to a different bend in the river," Wellborn explains.



She begins nearly every painting on location. She'll wade out to rocks in the middle of the river or climb to the top of a grassy hill to capture a view. It's there, in the out of doors, that she composes her paintings. Once she's home, she can refer to a photograph or her memory to fill in details. But the outline must be set where her eye can place each element on the canvas.

The vivid colors that are central to Wellborn's work begin when she coats her canvases in a solid color that sets the mood of the work — moss green, sunset lilac, butter yellow, terra cotta orange.

Often, she'll work on several paintings at the same time. "I like to have a couple of them going because they inform each other," she says.

Wellborn is a prolific painter. She estimates she creates from 75-125 paintings a year, though not all of those will be offered up for sale.

She's also a voracious learner, signing up for artists workshops every year, choosing classical painters to study and emulate in order to improve her craft. In 2017, she's challenged herself to paint even larger than she has in the past.

"I have seen her get bolder in her color, stronger in all of her formal capacities, larger in scale," says Roanoke artist Ann Glover, who met Wellborn shortly after Wellborn moved back to Roanoke. They've exhibited work together at The Market Gallery and on Open Studio tours.

"More of who she is is coming out," Glover says of Wellborn. "That's what happens when someone sticks with their art."

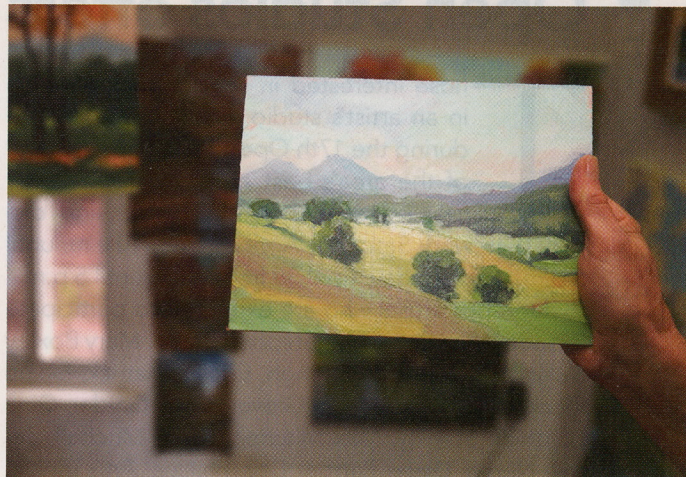
But even as Wellborn evolves as an artist, she says the core of who she is and what she's doing will not change.

There will always be her reverence for a view, her love of the outdoors and her quest as a painter — to transport the roar of the wind, the gurgle of the water, the still of the pasture onto whatever wall is holding them.

Read more of what Christina Nifong writes at [christinanifong.com](http://christinanifong.com). 🏡

**RIGHT: One of Wellborn's favorite subjects: a pastoral landscape.**

**BOTTOM: Wellborn emerges from her studio above a garage in South Roanoke.**



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