

Megan Marlatt points to a pile of mostly blue toys that she is currently painting on a large canvas. If the model pile is disturbed before she finishes, the painting is essentially lost or changed irreparably. It takes her as much as six months to complete one of these works.



Photo by Phil Audibert



One of Megan Marlatt's paintings of toys. Note Sponge Bob Square Pants having an anxiety attack left center. This painting appeared in a Philadelphia show called Cultural Vertigo in 2005.

When Megan Marlatt picked up that plastic cupid from a German street years ago, she had no idea that it contained two omens. One was that she would fall in love with Richard Robinson; the other was that she would go through a toy "period."

You've heard of artists going through phases. Picasso had his "blue" period; Megan Marlatt has her toys. "The nice thing about not being famous is that no one is invested in you, so if you don't like what you're doing after awhile, you can just change," says Megan brightly. "I go through about seven years where I wear out an idea."

Right now the idea is toys. It started with an assignment to her students at UVA to paint groups of small objects. When the students resisted, Megan walked across Main Street, Orange to the consignment shop where "they had all these plastic bags stuffed with all these McDonalds Happy Meal toys." They cost \$2 a bag. Megan bought eight, took them home and dumped them out on the floor. "These toys are really WEIRD," she remembers saying wide-eyed, "and there's so much weird emotion in them, and there's anger in them, and violence in them and angst."

Megan and Richard don't have a TV...haven't watched one in 20 years or so. "So I didn't know who Sponge Bob Square Pants was... But I was looking at this thing and said man, this toy is having an anxiety attack...I really liked the fact that that toy is having an anxiety attack, so I'll paint it." (Throughout this interview, Megan has

**Toys,
"a
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been fiddling with a miniature plastic toy of a man on horseback. Note that it is a toy man, not a woman. If it was a woman, it would be a doll, and she emphasizes that she does NOT paint dolls.)

Megan's paintings of jumbled heaps of toys can be quite large. They are also quite time consuming. In her studio, a pile of blue toys bears the sign, "Do Not Touch." She has them arranged just the way she wants them.

Even though she hates the

medium, she paints the toys in acrylic first, "because... it's gotta feel like melted plastic and that's basically what acrylic is, it's plastic." Then she paints over it in oil "in order to make it feel like a fine Flemish still-life that has a sense of form and depth and volume." A big canvas will take six, maybe eight months! "I paint them over and over and over again."

So what is it about toys, anyway? "I like that sense of color...and that sense of 'plasticness,'" she muses. "And then I like the sense of emotions that the toys convey, and then I think on some level, these are post-9-11 paintings. They have a lot to do with chaos and complete confusion and terror...a chaotic heap of destruction."

What will be Megan Marlatt's next period? Floods, perhaps.

Three days after she and Richard were married at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Rapidan, it flooded. "We lost our marriage certificate; it floated out." She painted a fresco in the church, depicting the flood. On an easel in her studio is a charcoal sketch of the deadly floods sparked by Hurricane Camille in Nelson County. "I've been fascinated with it on and off for years," she admits...

"A chaotic heap of destruction."



Orange's non-competing artists: Megan Marlatt is a painter, an art professor, and holds the chairmanship of the studio department at UVA. Richard Robinson is an accomplished freelance photographer, teacher and more recently a filmmaker.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Megan and Richard-- the INTENSITY

So Megan Marlatt is walking down a street in Germany when she spies something in the gutter. "There's this little golden plastic charm that looks like it came out of a bubblegum machine...and it's a little Cupid with an arrow."

Uh-oh. Is that an omen or what?

Megan had just met Richard Robinson at an art gallery function in Washington, DC. "And he talked with me all night long. I kept wondering why this little guy

was following me around that was so cute. And at the end of the party he asked for my number." She was clueless at the time. "I said, 'Oh, okay.'" She shrugs.

A day or two later, she's in Germany looking at a plastic cupid in the gutter, "And I pick it up and I look at it and I go, 'I'm not gonna fall in love!' " she protests. " 'I'm not fallin' in love,' " as if repeating herself will make it not happen.

Famous last words. "The

minute I got back from my trip to Germany there was this message from Richard wanting to take me out on a date and the rest is history."

Richard smiles shyly, his boyish good looks belying his 46 years. "Before I started dating Megan in DC, all the women I was meeting were lawyers, and it did kind of drive me crazy...it was just when you got into arguments, it was pretty intense. Having been a philosophy major, I could hold my own, but still..."

manipulate digital photographs. Richard rises to the bait. "There are news photographers who are fired all the time for manipulating photographs," he observes, adding that manipulating photographs is as old as photography itself. He points to 19th century photographer, Henry Peach Robinson (no relation) who used as many as seven separate negatives to create one image.

"And there came a period when the Americans, led by Stieglitz and Ansel Adams, said, 'We're not going to manipulate photographs. Everything is going to be straight,' and that is one of the great hallmarks of American photography." He pauses and reflects, "The thing that bothers me today is that people have forgotten that. And they realize you could always manipulate photographs; it was just a decision not to. Nowadays they're making the decision to manipulate photographs

but they're not being honest about making that decision. They're acting like technology is offering them a new possibility that they've never had, and it's not true. It's always been there."

Not long ago, Al Welker, of Not the Same Old Grind coffee shop, was unable to attend a film-makers workshop in Vancouver. He offered it to Richard. We're talking motion pictures here...movies. Richard came out of that with a movie named "Blue" that made it to several film festivals. "I'm trying to develop that second track to my career right now, partly because of the way things are changing; I think they are merging, photography and film, because of the technology, they're becoming inseparable," he says animatedly. As he sees it, the era of the still magazine photograph is on the way out. Video is the future. "I've actually become fascinated by it artistically."



This photo, called Sabbathday Lake, Maine, by Richard Robinson, appeared in an article about Shaker communities in New England. It appeared in *Smithsonian Magazine* in 2001.

And so two artists dating (and later marrying) each other...is that any easier? Is that any less intense? "I think it's wonderful," he says without hesitation. When dating non-artists, Richard noticed that, "what you think is important and what is not important is so different." Artists might be neurotic, but at least they understand each other.

Megan jumps in. "When I first met him, Richard said, 'Well some women think I'm intense.' And I go, 'Great! Because that's the same thing that I was accused of...of being too intense,' she remembers her ex-husband saying. "And so you may not be constantly in-sync, you may not share everything, but you don't do that anyway with anybody under the best circumstances."

Both Richard and Megan are intense, but in different ways. He talks a mile a minute, but so softly, you have to strain to hear him. It makes you pay

When you knock on the door, you are greeted by two yapping Affenpinschers, Uly and Penny, who Richard and Megan occasionally spritz with water to make them shut up...with little success. In fact, Richard and Megan are a familiar sight walking these two monkey-faced critters along the streets of Orange.

Starving artists, these guys are not, but rolling in dough they are not either. Both have independently carved out successful careers doing something creative that they love. Megan is an art professor at the University of Virginia...has been for years. She also holds the chair of the studio department there. In fact her students designed and painted that foxhunting scene on the wall next to Virginia National Bank. Having a "position" at UVA--not just a job--means, "I'm getting interrupted a lot; I've got to go in there and be an adult." She pouts.

Megan has been an artist her entire adult life, has a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Rutgers, has exhibited her work from Maine to Tennessee to Nuremburg, has painted murals with inner-city kids in New York, and has won

just about every other magazine in the Washington Metro area. He also teaches photography and filmmaking (video) at Randolph-Macon one day a week, and is in the process of earning his Master of Fine Arts Degree from VCU. He's a winner of the Lowell Thomas Gold Award for Travel Photography for a feature he did for Spirit Magazine (Southwest Airlines), called "The Old Man and the Keys." Oh, yes, he's also dabbling in motion pictures...well, not dabbling...Richard Robinson doesn't dabble.

These are busy folks. In the middle of all this, they somehow managed to find the time to renovate--right down to the wall studs--a building on Railroad Avenue. "We did all of the work," groans Megan: demolition, carpentry, plumbing, wiring, sheetrock, painting, the works.

Renovating and restoring old buildings taught them to work together. Megan remembers when they first came to Orange, they bought a house on Belleview Avenue. "Wouldn't it be great if we could fix up an old house together," she remembers saying starry-eyed. "Wouldn't that be romantic?" She sets her jaw and glares. "It was domestic warfare. We did a beautiful job on the house; people would come in and go, 'Golly what a beautiful house,' and we'd go, 'Are you kidding? There's an argument in every inch of this house.'" She pauses and softens. "But actually we did learn, by doing that, to work together really well."

Last summer they took 12 UVA art students to Tuscany. Megan taught drawing and painting; Richard taught photography. They also work together, teaching American college students at the Monserrat College of Art in Viterbo, Italy just about every summer since 2002. "We just work together really well," she confirms.

And they critique each other too. "He'll look at my work if I need some feedback, and he's always asking me for feedback on his work," continues Megan. In fact to give you an idea of what wavelength Richard and Megan are on, both, unbeknownst to the other, bought the same copy of the new Susan Sontag book.

They love to go to New York together, and they never argue about whether they should go to art galleries in Chelsea or visit the Statue of Liberty; they just argue about WHICH galleries they should visit in Chelsea.



Richard Robinson poses next to a print of a photo he shot back stage at the Wat Lao Buddhist Temple in Northern Virginia. The photo appeared in the *Washington Post* in July of 2000.

Photo by Phil Audibert

And when its time to work, well, there's "the intensity...when I know that he's completely caught up in his work, I completely understand it, and he completely understands it when I'm completely caught up in my work; there's none of this 'Why aren't you over here ironing my shirts?'"

Do they compete? Richard admits they used to, "but it's pretty much gone... we're in different enough fields." Megan thinks about that and busts into a grin. "Occasionally when someone gets something nice and the other person doesn't get it, like a grant or an exhibition at a museum..." She mock whines, "Are you happy for me? Could you please congratulate me?" Big guffaw.

So what in the world are these worldly types doing in little ol' Orange? To answer that, we have to go to the beginning. Richard went to Nepal, for the second time, "to do a body of work to start things going for my career." He had decided he was not going to be a lawyer; he was going to be a photographer. He submitted his work to a gallery on 18th Street. Megan, who was on the gallery board, chose his work. He was the only photographer chosen, by the way. They met at the gallery, and you know the rest.

Well, not really. Megan was teaching at UVA and living in a log cabin near Palmyra; Richard was living in Adams-Morgan in Washington. They traded weekends together, what Megan calls "country mouse and city mouse." When the time came to set up house together, Orange seemed like a logical

choice...close enough to Charlottesville for Megan to drive to work and not impossibly far for Richard to go to Washington if *Smithsonian* should call. Megan's then teen-age daughter from a previous marriage could attend Orange County schools.

So in 1994, after being run out by a nightmare of a neighbor in Charlottesville, they bought a house on Belleview and fixed it up. As founding members of the Belleview Neighborhood Association, they were instrumental in the renovation of the old Belleview School building. They were now officially, town mice.

And then one day, Linda Marston-Reid called up. She saw that the winner of the NEA fellowship in 1996, was another artist from Orange...Megan Marlatt. The two formed a fast friendship and hatched the idea for the Arts Center in Orange in Linda's living room. "It was a community effort," says Megan, not wanting to take much credit.

But it was Megan who discovered Joe Simms and Laura Burrell. At first, she made her studio (then, over the barber shop on Main Street) available Saturdays to the two mentally-challenged local artists. Today the Orange Studio Program is in its 11th year, going strong, providing space and materials to Joe and Laura.

The Arts Center in Orange can only be described as a local treasure. Visitors from towns twice Orange's size are green with envy. Richard, who is curator for the current Art of Documentary Photography exhibit observes, "They have the opportunity to be a world-class gallery." Megan chimes in, "They need support; it does give a lot to the community and also anchors the downtown area." She understands that not everyone is a passionate arts aficionado. "There's always people who don't care about the arts, just like there's people like me who don't care about television and football. That's just the way it is."

And so, town mice, Richard and Megan can gaze out their window onto Railroad Avenue, with a certain element of pride. They've seen many changes since 1994 when they first moved here. "Orange was dead," says Richard. But, it's different now, thanks in part to this dynamic couple. "We love Orange," says Megan sincerely. "Orange has been very good to us."



Megan and Richard relax on the purple couch with Affenpinschers, Uly and Penny and Japanese Chin, Wasabi. Their recently renovated apartment is above her studio on Railroad Avenue. Note one of Megan's "toy" paintings on the wall.

Photo by Phil Audibert

several artist awards, most notably the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Individual Fellowship in Painting, when they were still giving out those types of things.

Richard has followed a parallel path in the "other" visual art, photography, since he set up a dark room at age 14. "I always loved photography but I never thought it could be a career," he says pensively. So he took a pragmatic approach. He learned the craft by being an assistant to many established shooters in DC, "and took mental notes." The "art" part he developed on his own. "I never really liked the commercial world of photography; I much preferred the art world."

Today, Richard Robinson is regularly published in *Smithsonian Magazine*, the *Washington Post*, and

attention. Megan on the other hand could have had a second career as a stand-up comic. She sprinkles lively conversation with jokes and bouts of infectious laughter. It's hard not to join in.

Both are artists. She paints; he's a photographer. Together they live in a beautifully restored eclectically furnished "loft" above her studio in... not Chelsea, not Soho, not Savannah, but on Railroad Avenue in Orange. The one thing conspicuously missing from this living space is a television.



Nuns walking home from church. Viterbo, Italy.

Copyright Richard Robinson

Digital vs. Film

"I'm still working with film, but I'm getting pushed into doing digital," says Richard Robinson with a note of frustration in his voice.

In case you haven't noticed there's a revolution going on in photography these days...the digital guys versus the film guys. "It's a lot easier in a lot of ways," says Richard of digital. "I don't really buy the quality argument. I don't think that it's better, but it's a lot easier." It's obvious that Richard is a film guy.

But, he's not anti-computer. In fact, he scans everything he shoots onto the computer, "but I still like starting with film." Digital has what he calls "a very different feel...I have not been thrilled with the digital work that I've seen. It seems a little flat to me." Asked about film's tendency to look grainy, he responds, "I've always been okay with grain. I prefer grain to pixels. I don't like pixels so much."

The other night at the Arts Center at the opening

of The Art of Documentary Photography exhibit that Richard put together, *National Geographic* staff photographer and exhibitor, Bill Allard was spied with a (gasp!) digital camera around his neck. Of course, Allard's signature photographs on the wall were all shot on film, probably with his trusty Leica or his F2 Nikon.

"The negative side is everybody's changing their equipment every two years," grouses Richard, "which is incredibly distracting because you can't get to know your equipment in two years. It used to be you used the same camera for 10 to 20 years and you would know it like the back of your hand. Now you have to read these damn manuals all the time." Amen to that. "People aren't thinking about their images that much anymore; they're just thinking about the technology."

That sparks a question about how easy it is to

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