

Wisdom and Wit:
The Art of Virginia Precourt



vose

A DIVISION OF
VOSE GALLERIES
OF BOSTON

NEW AMERICAN REALISM
contemporary



Just Waiting, 1973
Pencil on paper
34^{1/2} x 29 inches

VP-21

Wisdom and Wit:
The Art of Virginia Precourt

September 18 to October 30, 2004

Vose

NEW AMERICAN REALISM
c o n t e m p o r a r y



Angelica Musicanti

VP-4

Pencil on paper

38 x 46 inches

FOREWORD

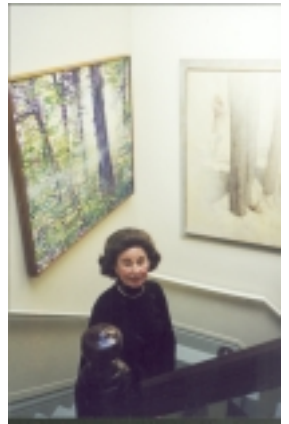
A large pasteleaf painting by Virginia Precourt, entitled *Water Lily II*, hangs in a prominent spot on the porch at our home in Duxbury, MA. On the first warm day in July this summer, a magnificent creamy yellow water lily broke the surface of our new fish pond, mirroring Virginia's image only thirty feet away. While the pond lily sadly faded after one day, Virginia's remains a faithful reminder of summer's pleasures, a fitting metaphor for her artistic quest in search of permanency.

The Vose Family has known Virginia Precourt for nearly forty-five years, beginning with Robert C. Vose, Jr. (1911-1998) who thought her work was the most innovative he had ever seen. Nancy Allyn Jarzombek's essay in this, our second exhibition of Virginia's work, discusses in detail her novel techniques, focusing particularly on the materials she incorporates into her pasteleaf and polyfresco images. The

work in this show includes disciplined graphics as well as inventive fantasy, but in all her work there are certain consistent components: the air of mystery, the importance of the figure, the sense of precision, and complex composition based on elegant patterns. It is a privilege to work with such a thoughtful, passionate, creative artist.

Marcia L. Vose
Vice-President

Abbot W. Vose
President



Hidden Spring, 2003, mixed media on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

VP-61

WISDOM AND WIT *by Nancy Jarzombek*

She is reticent by nature. *"My life is pretty simple. I just do what I love,"* she reports modestly. And then she laughs as though sharing a joke. All around her, in her studio and throughout her home, is evidence of decades of experimentation, dogged pursuit, a taste for what is funny and what is beautiful.

While well known in certain circles, Virginia Precourt lives and works in a secluded wooded location just south of Boston, rarely exhibiting her work in public exhibitions. In 2001 Vose Galleries introduced her to a wider public with a show of twenty-eight drawings and paintings. This current exhibition is the second of that series, featuring paintings, drawings, and collages from the 1960s to the present day. Despite her quiet profile, Ms. Precourt's professional accomplishments are numerous. In addition to receiving private portrait commissions, she has painted a mural for the public library in Westwood, Massachusetts, and has paintings in the permanent collections of the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln and the Weyerhaeuser Collection of the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury and collections, private and corporate, here and abroad. She has had the support and encouragement of many important collectors, and recalls Robert C. Vose, Jr., with special fondness. *"Bob Vose told me to keep going,"* she said. *"He told me, 'You keep on experimenting!'"* In 1980 she received the John Singleton Copley Master's Medallion from the Copley Society of Boston.

Virginia Precourt took the first steps toward her remarkable career while still a child. Miserable when her father's promotion forced them to move from Duluth, MN to Cleveland, she brought her drawings to the head mistress of the Laurel School and applied for admission. She was eleven years old, and she was accepted. There she came under the spell of several teachers, among them a Miss Besaw, who became, in Virginia's words, *"the greatest inspiration I ever had, fostering a lasting interest in Renaissance art and techniques."*

After winning a scholarship to spend the summer of her

sophomore year at the Cleveland Museum of Art, she graduated from Laurel in 1934, in the heart of the Great Depression, came to Boston, and enrolled at the Museum School. She was dissatisfied with the way they taught fundamentals, however, and switched to the Art Institute of Chicago. *"Two years later, in 1936, I couldn't sell a thing,"* she recalls. *"My parents declared enough was enough and either I come home or try earning my own living for a change. I loved my independent artist's life, but during those awful depression years I knew I couldn't support myself painting pictures. But I could draw! I sought out freelance commercial art assignments, mostly newspaper ads for children's apparel, sale items, and home furnishings. That experience taught me the importance of disciplined productivity. The first of many doors had opened to worlds of creative possibilities."*

Virginia thus began a twenty-year stint in commercial design. She branched out and began to design products and packaging first for a franchise of the Dow Chemical Company and later as a free-lance artist. Through the 1940s and 1950s she experimented with new, post-war materials – plastics, adhesives and other synthetic materials – to develop improved applications for household products and packaging. She also worked in fashion design and with *Vogue*, *Life* Magazine, and Mountain Artisans.

An intensely curious and imaginative person, she continued to study art. In particular she was still fascinated by ancient frescoes and traveled to spots around the world to study restoration processes. Commercial activities came to a crashing halt, however, when she was diagnosed with cancer in 1958 and moved for the summer with her husband and two sons to their cottage in Maine. *"Illness gave me a chance to break away,"* Virginia recalled. During her recovery she experimented with adhesives and polymers, developing a new kind of fresco; she called them *'stone paintings'* and later, polyfrescos. The great granite rocks of Booth Bay Harbor became her medium, as she ground them into powder and mixed them with pure pigments. These she folded into a prepared framed panel that had been saturated

with polyvinyl acetate. Controlling the drying time gave her the ability to manipulate the surface of her work, carving out and adding to, to achieve the effect she was looking for. The ground stone gave her a unique surface texture that she loved working with. The final stage of the experiment was to leave them outdoors throughout the winter. By springtime the paintings showed no sign of wear, and she discovered that her new technique produced impermeable work.

Along the same vein, seeking permanence and desiring surface texture that she could manipulate, she began working with pastels, which consist of pure pigments combined with chalk and enough binder to form workable sticks. She was in pursuit of color, and a way of trapping it, inspired, she writes, by the wings of butterflies: *"the intricate and precisely luminous patterns that cling intact to wings which are subject to continuous motion, air currents and weather."* Again she approached the problem from its foundation. She prepared a board, sealed layers of fabric to it to provide texture, and used gold size medium – a tacky adhesive used in gold leafing. When the medium became tacky, she began to apply pastel color. *"Finally,"* she writes, *"the colors build up, vibrate against another, sealed from the rear. Now depth, clarity, precision and non-chalkiness are achieved. I cannot replicate this result in any other way."*



Detail of *Early Risers, Rocky Brook* (pg. 12)

Virginia has produced an abundant body of work that ranges from representational to pure abstraction. No one could produce a more beautiful graphite drawing of mother and child, in a more traditional way; at the same time she will create highly abstract swirls of color such as *Genesis* (pg. 13) and *Kokoro* (back cover). She makes a distinction

between paintings for which she is the observer, such as *Sea Wall* (pg. 11) or the comical *Bye Bye Birdie* (pg. 21), and paintings in which she is a participating member, such as *On Shore Sun Spill* (pg. 23) and *Sundance in Autumn* (pg. 20). In these life-size works she experiences, with the viewer, a world filled with jewel-like color. She is a restless and experimental artist, often working on several pieces at the same time, moving from oil to drawing to pastel. *"I have learned not to throw things out. Now I put things to one side and go to a different technique. And eventually I come back to it."*

Aside from polyfresco and pasteleaf, which are discrete techniques involving prescribed steps, she nearly always works on a toned ground and uses a number of materials: charcoal, pencil, colored pencil, ink and pastel for drawing; casein, acrylic, gesso and oil for painting. The razor blade comes in very handy for slicing through top layers revealing surprise pigments underneath. In her own words, *"I start with a colored background and will build color upon color, dimension upon dimension, in a series of minute textured dots that add depth and dimension to the work."* Circles figure widely in her work, from the tiny points of stone in the polyfresco to the larger inscribed arcs that connect compositional elements. *"When I look at some of my work I realize that I have unconsciously incorporated circle upon circle..."*

Virginia's choice of subject matter is provocative, given her passion for permanence. She scrutinizes rocks, sky and water, wringing from them what is universal and what is beautiful, but beauty is, after all, temporal. The flowering water lily is with us for only a day; the youthful dancer will grow old; the acrobat is moving, always moving. There are surreal moments, such as the painting *Big Wheel* (pg. 22), which was inspired by a visit to the excavation site of a Greek charioteer who had been buried with his chariot, horses and personal servants. And there are moments of sheer whimsy in paintings such as *Golf Curse* (pg. 14) and its companion piece, *Bye Bye Birdie* (pg. 21), which show the various unhappy fates of the golf ball. Likewise, her studies of people, from poignant to comical, reflect a deep and moving delight in life in all its packages. These are the threads that run through all of her work – a love of beauty, a regard for what is universal, and the humility of not taking herself too seriously. What nourishes her art is a balance of ingredients, some steadfast and rock solid, and others as transient as a smile.

PASTELEAF AND PASTEL

PASTELEAF

The artist notes, "The pasteleaf method results in a wonderful brilliance. I can build up layer after layer, and any chalkiness is removed since the pastel is bound from the rear".

Working in small areas at a time, Precourt applies a mixture of pumice, turpentine and Hastings's Gold Size to the panel on which fabric is adhered. After thirty minutes the mixture dries to a tacky stage and the artist quickly applies pastel, repeating the process until several layers have built up. The finished work consists of solid pigment impregnated with the binding agent, which resists flaking and fading.



Squall Line
Pasteleaf on canvas
24 x 34^{1/2} inches

VP-39



Rehearsal Break, 1975
Pastel on canvas
48 x 24 inches

VP-33



The Little Black Dress, 2000-2001
Pastel on canvas
30 x 40 inches

VP-46



Napoleon's Pillow
Pastel on canvas
26 x 38 inches

VP-45

POLYFRESCO

POLYFRESCO

Virginia Precourt made many trips to Italy, Bulgaria and Rumania to study the deterioration of the regions' ancient frescoes. Determined to develop a more stable medium than pigment applied to wet plaster, she used her knowledge of the plastics industry to develop a process that would be more permanent. After much experimentation, she com-

bined polyvinyl acetate with ground stone, which she prepared by hand until casting stone became available, and applied pigment. She then buried the finished work near her studio in Maine for two years after which the painting emerged unscathed. Since then clients have told us that they hang these works outside in their porches or garden rooms with the same results.



Acrobat, 1960
Polyfresco
58 x 49 inches

VP-02



Sea Wall, 1992-93
Polyfresco
48 x 60 inches

VP-36



Early Risers, Rocky Brook, 2004
Polyfresco
52 x 64 inches

VP-75



Genesis, 1967 - 1969
Polyfresco
48 x 61^{1/2} inches

VP-16

MIXED MEDIA



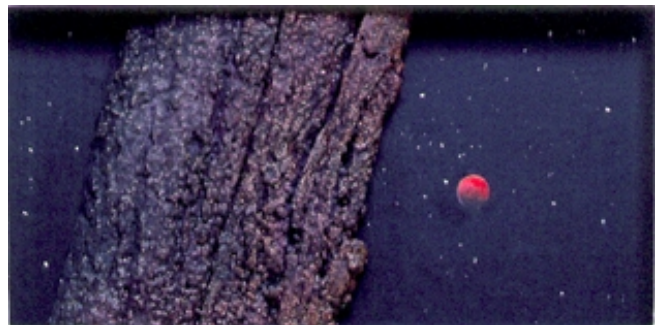
Golf Curse, 1992
Mixed media
30 x 49^{1/2} inches

VP-17



Growth Dynamics: Power Source, Magnetic Tracery
Multi-dimensional aluminum-leafed masonite on Baltic birch
60 x 72 inches

VP-18



Origins, 1994
Styrene, mixed media
24 x 33 inches

VP-28



Nomads and the Demon Wind, 1977
Wax oil stick, casein and scraffiti on treated canvas
31 x 61 inches

VP-26a



Lily
Mixed media
20 x 24 inches

VP-23



Shallows, 2004
Mixed media
36^{1/2} x 48^{1/2} inches

VP-72



Kathryn's Garden Path...Sunburst, 2003
Mixed media on canvas
25^{1/2} x 31^{1/2} inches

VP-60



Lightning Bug Weather, 2004
Mixed media on canvas
30 x 40 inches

VP-73

WORKS ON PAPER



Study for "Garden Parties" mural no. 3
Pencil on paper
40 x 30 inches

VP-67



Study for "Garden Parties" mural no. 15, pencil on paper
60 x 40 inches

VP-68



Study for "Garden Parties" mural no. 4, pencil on paper
32^{1/2} x 34^{1/2} inches



Along the Way . . . (Indonesia, always a chicken...)
Colored pencil on paper
27^{1/2} x 24 inches

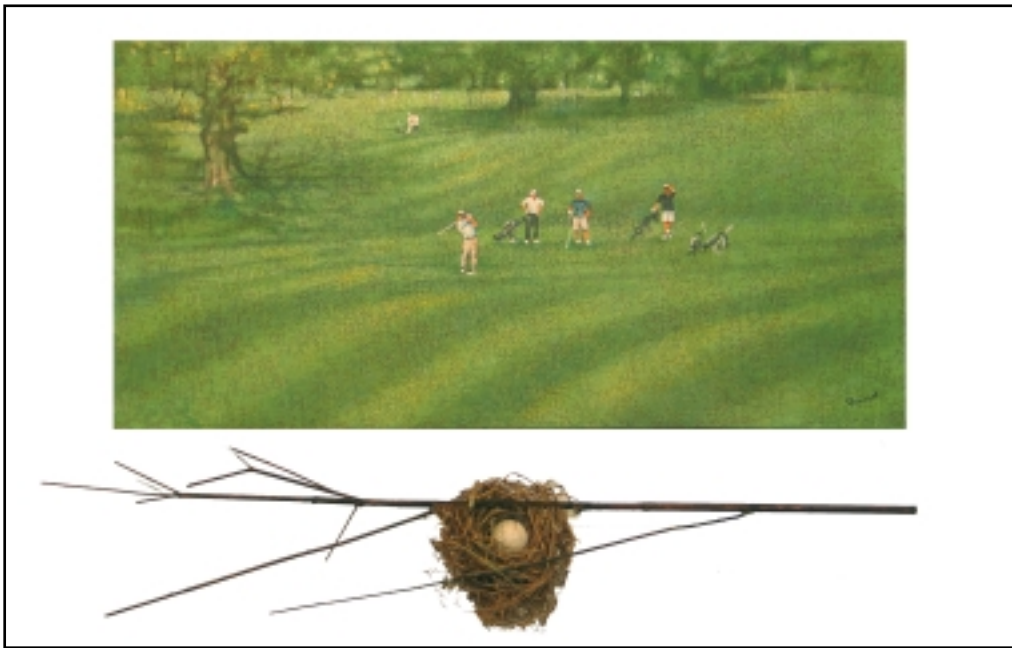
VP-03

OIL, ACRYLIC AND CASEIN ON CANVAS



Sundance in Autumn, 1999
Oil, casein and acrylic on canvas
60 x 72 inches

VP-42



VP-76

Bye, Bye, Birdie, 2004

- 1: Oil and casein on canvas, 18 x 36 inches
2. Antiqued brass twig and treated bird's nest, 10 x 41



VP-58

Elm Bank

Oil, casein and acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 inches



Big Wheel, 1974
Acrylic and oil on canvas
48 x 85 inches

VP-32



Red Sky Sailors' Delight, 2004
Oil and acrylic on canvas
55 x 61 inches

VP-74



Neenah's Child, 2003
Oil and canvas mounted on board
24 x 18 inches

VP-67



Pink Ballerina
Oil and casein on canvas
36 x 48 inches

VP-48



Bhutan, Himalayan Legacy
Oil pencil, color pencil and casein on Canvas
27 x 21 inches

VP-07



On Shore Sun Spill, 2004
Oil, casein and acrylic on canvas
49 x 85^{1/2} inches

VP-41



Kokoro - Soul of Things

Polyfresco
61 x 53 inches

VP-22