



Dean Mitchell in his studio. Photo by Jacob Blickenstaff.

AMERICAN DREAMS, AMERICAN DREAMERS

The Art of Dean Mitchell

By Krystle Stricklin

For artist Dean Mitchell, the American South is a landscape of memories, some joyful and some difficult, and his tremendous body of work offers viewers a vibrant tapestry of modern American life. Working in watercolor, oil and acrylic, Mitchell's work covers a range of subjects from urban city scenes and Southwestern landscapes to intimate portraits of family members, friends and strangers who he encountered on the streets or in chance meetings—a veritable cast of fascinating characters. This April, at the Portrait

Society's 21st annual *The Art of the Portrait* conference, Mitchell will receive the Gold Medal Award for his lifelong pursuit of artistic excellence and extraordinary contributions to the artistic community. Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Mitchell about his accomplishments and inspiring body of works. In our conversations, we spoke frankly about the lack of diversity among collectors and in collections, the systemic poverty and discrimination that plagues our country, and how his work often shows honest, yet

conflicting, portrayals of "The American Dream" and those who struggle to survive in an ever-changing America.

Chief among his list of accomplishments is the creation of a gallery named in honor of his grandmother, Marie Brooks. What's in a name, you ask? For Mitchell, a lot. He was raised from 11 months to 18 years by his grandmother, who was known in her community simply as "the cook." Despite criticism from friends and family who thought he should name the gallery after himself "so people will know it,"

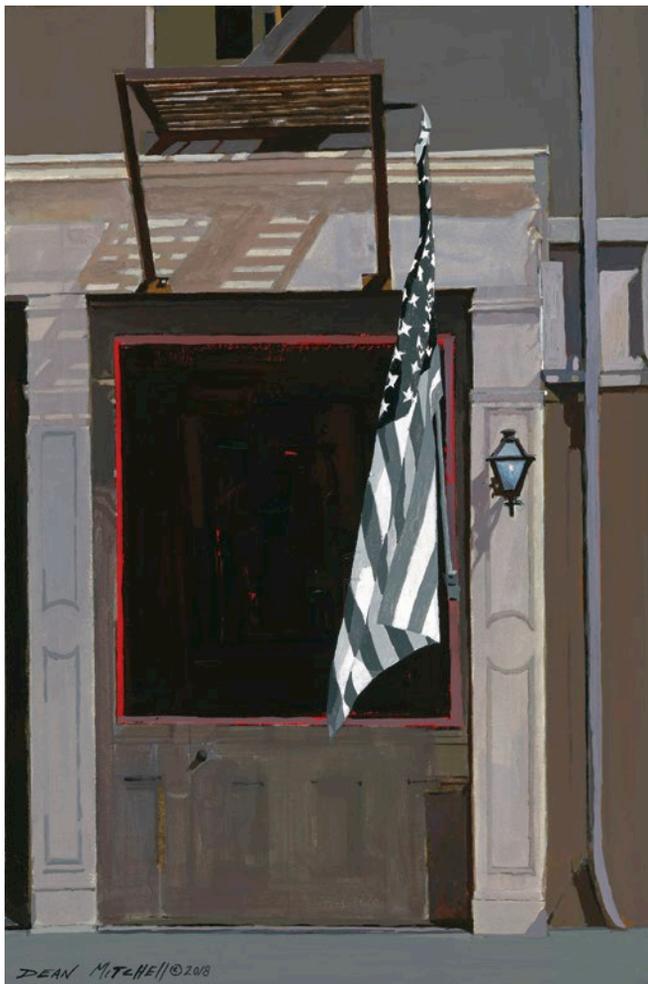
The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

— James Baldwin
(1924-1987)

Mitchell insisted that it bare his grandmother's name. It is his way of restoring something to a woman who gave him so much and to ensure that her name is not forgotten. Mitchell envisioned the gallery as a space not only for exhibiting work, but also to play a vital role in the community of Quincy, Florida, through art lectures, workshops and for supporting scholarships for local artists. To give credit where credit is due, Mitchell eagerly admits that the idea for the gallery came from his wife, who for years had been encouraging him to share his amassed collection of work and find a way to give back to the community.

Born in the early years of the civil rights movement, Mitchell was deeply affected by the social movements and racial segregation that he witnessed and the stories he heard from family and friends. On his upbringing, Mitchell explains, "I grew up in the segregated South in Quincy, Florida—a small town where poverty and discrimination were an everyday reality for many people, especially for black folks." This early exposure to social inequity and racial prejudices informed his later choices in subject matter. He adds, "My work isn't about painting pretty pictures, I'm not that guy. I want my pictures to say something about what it means to be human—to struggle and strive. Part of America's beauty is in her struggles, and it's what makes us beautiful, as humans."

Among his works is a series of *Buffalo Soldier* portraits that depict modern-day military reenactors, as well as surviving veterans who



American in Black and White, acrylic, 15 x 10" (38 x 25 cm)

served in the segregated "buffalo soldier" Army units during World War II. These units were named after the segregated African-American regiments, which were formed during the Civil War. While historians disagree about how the nickname began, and whether it was meant as a derogatory term, there is no doubt that members of the unit (from both centuries) were often confronted with racial prejudices. On a visit to Fort Leavenworth,

Kansas, Mitchell spoke with one of the WWII veterans, Raymond Bardwell, who he later painted in several portraits. On his talks with the veterans, Mitchell says, "They told stories of discrimination, and their honesty about race and the military was difficult to hear, but I realized the only way we move forward as a nation is to address the truth no matter how difficult. After hearing them speak, I wanted to celebrate these men who had been through so

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much and were still alive, still here and telling their stories.”

Mitchell’s attention to segregated environments and spaces pregnant with emotion and symbolism is seen throughout his works. One such painting is *Mr. Northern*, a portrait of a man named Joseph Northern, who lives in the small town of Greensboro, Florida, not far from the Marie Brooks gallery in Quincy. Depicted in profile, Northern sits complacent on his porch with his feet propped up in a chair and his left arm resting comfortably on the porch’s stark white railing. “There is a long history of the porch as a psychological space, and for me it was the place where stories were told,” Mitchell explains. He went on to describe the lively conversations and stories that were told on his porch growing up, specifically recalling discussions about the importance of education as a way out of poverty.

Reflecting further on the topic of America and the American Dream, we discussed his captivating work *American in Black and White*. His white and gray American flag softly swings in a doorway, framed in red and black. Mitchell says, “The setting for this work is

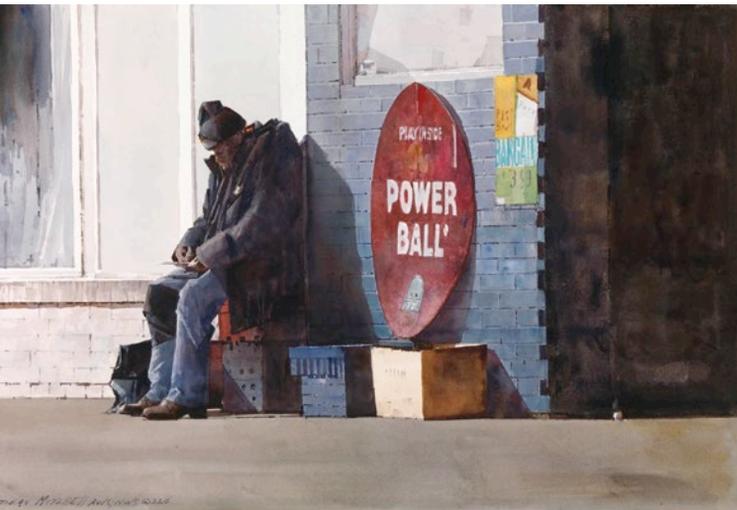


Raymond Bardwell, *Buffalo Soldier*, watercolor, 18 x 30" (46 x 76 cm)

the French Quarter in New Orleans, a place full of beautiful, vibrant colors. But I really wanted to show that you can create a thing of beauty in grays—to show the beauty of diversity, of black and white.” This brought our conversation to a personal favorite of his

works, *Power Ball*. After agreeing that it was also a favorite of his, Mitchell observes, “Isn’t this scene just so telling of American culture and the desire for wealth?” He describes how he came upon the scene while walking around the urban-center of Denver, where he quickly snapped a few photos for the basic composition and then worked from both memory and his imagination. In the painting, a tired man sits outside on a low windowsill, hunched forward and clutching a lottery ticket in his hand. A red and white Powerball sign hangs to his left, visibly worn-out and peeling from the brick façade. I’ve always wondered if this man spent his last few dollars on that lottery ticket. We agreed that many people define the American Dream as “success through hard work,” but that is such a simplistic view, and the reality is often much more complicated. And that is what Mitchell shows us in his work—the complicated beauty of American life.

Always challenging the limits of his knowledge and skills, Mitchell spends most days at work in his studio or on projects for his



Power Ball, watercolor, 20 x 30" (51 x 76 cm)



Mr. Northern, watercolor, 24 x 34" (61 x 86 cm)

gallery. Currently, he is working on another series of portraits of his mother, who is suffering the devastating effects of Alzheimer's disease. At the end of our conversation, we talked about how he wants his work to remind people of the fragility and brevity of life. "Everyone is born into a space and time, and we don't know what that will be or how long we have—but it doesn't matter," he says. "All that matters is what you do with it, with your time while you have it." [Read More](#)

Krystle Stricklin, guest writer for the *Portrait Society of America*, is a PhD candidate in the history of art and architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, specializing in North American art, photography, and the visual legacies of war and empire. Krystle received her bachelor's and master's degrees in the history and criticism of art from Florida State University.

Hazel Mae, watercolor, 15 x 18" (38 x 46 cm)

