

DRAFT

Two Artists: Same Views – Different Views

About 30 years ago, Sunnie and Ray LeBlanc spotted a painting by Marnell Brown in a Whitefish gallery. The simple scene of a man hitching his mules to a plow spoke to the LeBlanc's, so they purchased the painting that still hangs in Sunnie's Montana home. A few years later the two artists met, taking the first step in a more than 20-year friendship that has now led to a joint exhibition "Art in the Time of Covid: Oil Paintings by Marnell Brown and Sunnie LeBlanc" which is scheduled to open on July 2 in the Bigfork Art & Cultural Center.

Sunnie LeBlanc was born and raised in Boston, where she grew up riding English saddle, visiting museums and traveling extensively with her family. For Marnell Brown, the mountains were always her home, first in Northern California and later in NW Montana. Growing up, her focus was on the outdoors where she ran cross-country, skied and later worked as a trail hand in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. On paper, the two couldn't be more different.

But they are remarkably similar in their love of the land they both call home. Both Marnell and Sunnie enjoy painting *En Plein Air*, outside and on location where an artist can experience a sense of place along with that spectacular view. For more than 20 years, the two have set up their easels in Glacier National Park, the fields near Kalispell and the backcountry north of Whitefish. While the two artists concentrate on their work, they are often accompanied by Marnell's sister Gigi Brown who keeps an eye out for the four-legged critters that might wander a bit too close for comfort. And while they might be painting in the same location, the end results are striking in both their similarities and their differences in size and style.

LeBlanc's work is categorized as realism or even photorealism. Her style is reminiscent of the Hudson River School artists, focusing on panoramic views of ideal landscapes. Sunnie says that she tries to "find the ideal and capture it" for the viewer. She sketches and photographs her landscapes and animals such as bears and big horn sheep before applying her oil paints on site and also in her studio. She paints with big brushes and uses a full palette and a high saturation of color. She does not use a medium, but prefers to mix colors and apply them on a fully-loaded brush. Sunnie's works favor the far-off vistas; the depth of the landscapes and the disappearing horizon line are familiar techniques. She paints reflections in the ponds, lakes and rivers with ease and delight.

Brown paints on location on artist-prepared canvas on board. Her studies of horses, mules and life in the backcountry reflect a life lived simply and profoundly. She rarely uses a camera, relying instead on her memory of time and place. She chooses a limited color palette, linseed oil diluted as a medium and selects from various brush sizes. Her painting strokes overlap in thick broad swaths, resulting in a surface that is textural, never even or smooth. Brown utilizes harmonious color combinations with shades of gray and neutrals defining the major elements in the composition. She seeks out the intimate, the close-in aspects of the landscape in a style often described as somewhere between tonalism and realism and impressionism.

Both artists paint the vistas and animals of this part of the country. Both tell a story with oils and brushes. Many times, they have been working side by side to create the 25 paintings on exhibit. But there the similarities end. Both LeBlanc and Brown bring a singular view of Montana's great

outdoors to the walls of the Bigfork Art & Cultural Center. The paintings tell the story of this part of the country as well as a friendship grounded in art.