

MIKE LYNCH

2003 Distinguished Artist

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Introduction

As one of his friends points out later in this book, the designation “distinguished artist” doesn’t rest comfortably on Mike Lynch. Lynch’s painterly world of back streets and industrial monuments—portrayed in darkness or at dusk, often just before the wrecking ball strikes—is decidedly ordinary. But, as rendered by Lynch’s pen, paints, and brush, these mundane landscapes are extraordinary emotional documents. Dimly illuminated by a corner lamppost, Lynch’s silent streets attest to the soon-to-be-forgotten moments that make up daily life.

Lynch’s mostly realist paintings are widely collected by individuals and corporations throughout Minnesota. He has exhibited at virtually every major Minnesota art museum. He has won prestigious fellowships and awards from Minnesota organizations, including the Bush and McKnight foundations. He has illustrated books for notable Minnesota writers Garrison Keillor and Jon Hassler. Yet his name is hardly a household word.

Why? Perhaps because he is so profoundly Minnesotan, in the way we like to think of ourselves. He is modestly dedicated to creating his art rather than promoting it. Fame tends to follow those who are quotable and flamboyant, who stand out from the crowd. To Lynch, it is the work, more than recognition, that counts. It is no secret to anyone who knows him that he has made many sacrifices to live as an artist, accepting the frugality and insecurity that accompany such a choice.

Mike Lynch may not feel “distinguished,” but his dedication to his craft is clear to anyone who sees his work. It is reflected in sublime quality, which, along with his humility and work ethic, has influenced succeeding generations of Minnesota artists.

The McKnight Foundation is privileged to have this opportunity to recognize Lynch. In these unsettled days, his work reveals the fleeting beauty of everyday life and reminds us to cherish the time we have.

Noa Staryk
Chair
The McKnight Foundation

Opposite:
Norwegian Church 1994
oil on panel
8 7/8 x 12 1/4 inches



LYNCH



Houses, Superior West 1994
ink and gouache on gray paper
5 1/2 x 9 inches

Opposite:
Gold Medal Looking Southeast 1996
ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper
11 x 8 1/2 inches

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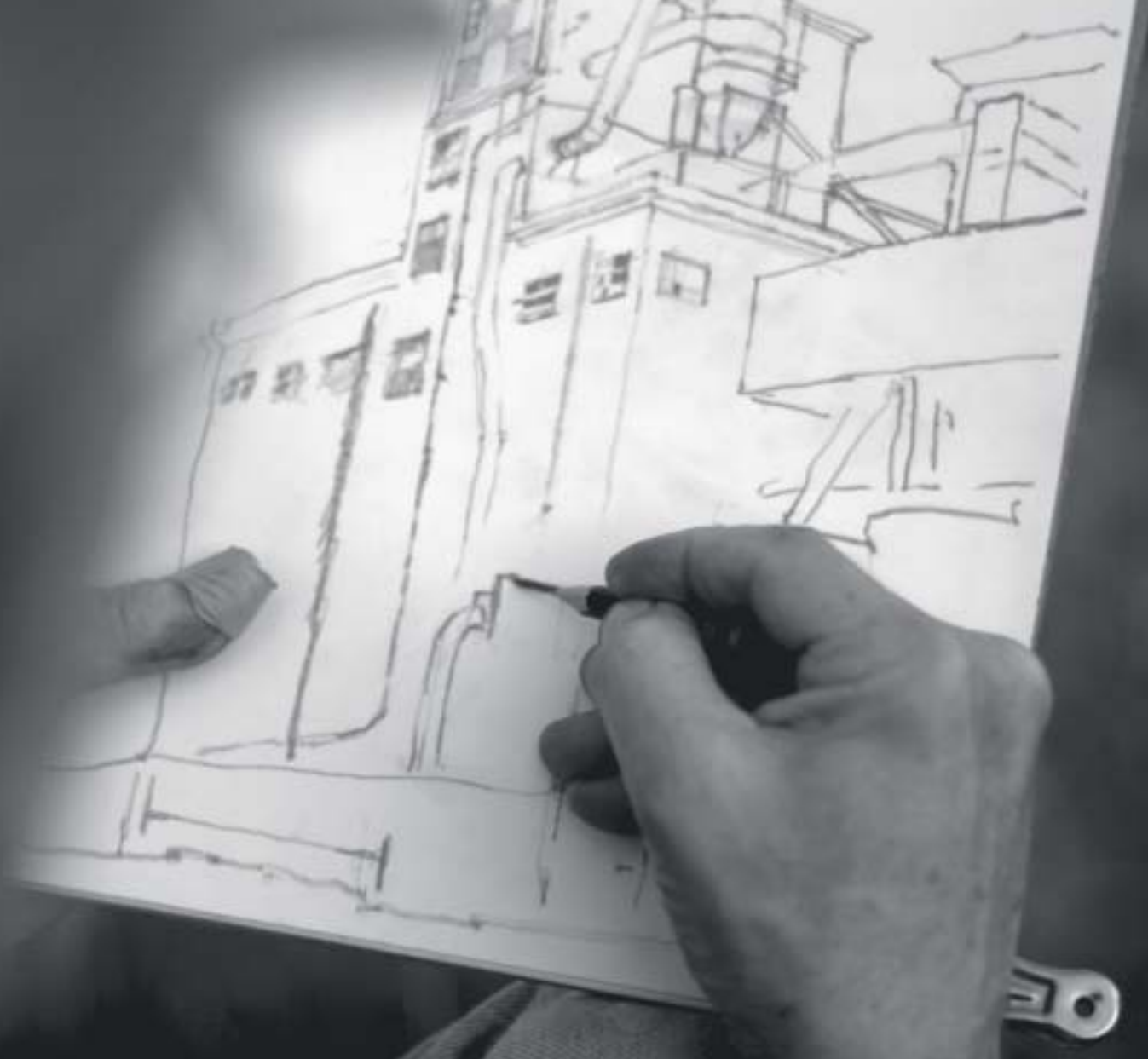
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On Realism

Artist's statement from the catalogue for "The Academic Dialogue," a 1991 exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

By Mike Lynch

I don't claim that realism is the only way to paint, or the best way. I don't claim it's more profound or more fun. I only say it can be worth doing. A lot of things can be worth doing. I read in the Sunday paper once about an old guy up north building a road through the swamp from nowhere to nowhere. Hard work. Flies and mosquitoes. His destination was 150 miles away—some little town with a couple of bars and a closed movie theater. He'd surely die before he got there. Yet for that old guy it was worth doing. He kept himself fit. He made a little progress each day. Sometimes Forest Rangers went on his road. It was worth doing, and painting realistically can be worth doing too.

When I was young, fresh from art school, I worked often from imagination and memory. There were a few strong images in my head, but after a while it got hard to come up with new ones. They seemed gray and dark and murky, and I'd change my mind all the time thinking maybe this way, no, maybe that way. I started looking

more to nature—to the real world—for ideas. My pictures from nature were more solid, had more contrast and better color. Nature provided an external reference.

In trying to imitate or echo nature, I got immersed in the technical problems of doing it and in looking at how other artists did it. It was so hard just doing it at all that there wasn't room to be fancy or to worry about if it was perfect or not, and then things seemed to go better. So nature and tradition showed me a way out of my troubles, more or less. A path well worn by artists before me, but still new in each particular instance.

In working outside you also have adventures and meet some interesting people. Kids always ask me if I'm an artist. I say, "No, I'm a private detective. This is my disguise." Usually one wants to go, and one wants to hang around a while and watch. ■



Pop at the Mine 1958
oil on canvas
16 x 12 inches

Enduring Moments

Mike Lynch's paintings depict a world that seems to have preexisted us and yet promises to outlast us.

By Eleanor Heartney

One of the earliest paintings by Mike Lynch still in existence is titled *Pop at the Mine*. Painted in 1958, when Lynch was 20 years old, it is unusual for several reasons. For one, rather than being the result of direct observation, it is what Lynch calls a “memory painting.” It is based on a childhood recollection of his father bent over a book at his job as a night watchman at the Scranton mine in Hibbing, Minnesota. For another, in contrast to almost all of Lynch’s subsequent work, this painting contains a figure.

But despite these anomalies, *Pop at the Mine* already manifests many of the qualities that would ultimately make Lynch one of Minnesota’s most respected painters. In the painting, the figure is almost dwarfed by the tall vertical window behind him and the pair of doors in the foreground, which open onto the scene like stage flats. Though it is clearly a night scene, the figure’s back and chair are bathed in a flood of light that emanates from a source hidden by the open door, which itself remains in shadow. The play of light and dark, the close attention to

Lynch finds beauty where others might see eyesores.

detail, and above all the sense of mystery and alienation look ahead to the paintings for which Lynch is best known.

Lynch was born in Hibbing in 1938 and, except for a few brief forays to Amsterdam and California, is a lifelong resident of Minnesota. His art education had a sporadic quality, including several stints at the Town Hall Art Colony in Grand Marais, a residence at a summer art program sponsored by the University of Minnesota in Duluth, and studies at the Minneapolis School of Art and the Rijks Academy in Amsterdam. He notes that the greater part of his art education took place through the discussions he had with other painters during the 20-odd years he worked part-time as a framer.

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

Over the last 45 years, Lynch has focused largely on unpeopled landscapes, though he also occasionally depicts interiors and still lifes. What he doesn't paint is almost as instructive as what he does. One finds in his landscapes no bustling city scenes, no celebrations of architectural newness, no lush views of Minnesota's famous forests and lakes. Instead, Lynch presents nocturnal gas stations, empty hallways, and quiet street scenes that have something of the loneliness found in the

paintings of Edward Hopper. His winter views have the cold stillness of Charles Burchfield. Even when he turns to more recognizably contemporary panoramas of tall office or industrial buildings, he imbues them with a sense of history and age. Lynch notes, "I'm more interested in architecture that has accumulated over time, rather than being designed. I like things that have just happened, that are weathered, added on."

Thus, although Lynch generally works directly from the scene before him, his tableaux often appear as if they could have been painted in the early decades of the century. Many of his most striking paintings are nocturnal scenes. He carefully captures the strangeness of night. In his paintings, street lamps become glowing orbs, the lights of distant cars appear as brilliant pointillist patterns, and the walls of buildings reform themselves into flat rectangles of shadow or reflected illumination.

"Things simplify at night," Lynch says. They are also transformed. Even the most banal scene is rendered mysterious by nightfall.

Lynch also paints scenes of dawn and dusk, when the half-light is suffused with traces of pink or blue, and of winter, when the snow reflects back a soft, overall

“I’m more interested in architecture that has accumulated over time, rather than being designed. I like things that have just happened, that are weathered, added on.”



Marine Oil Company 1985
oil on panel
16 x 22 inches

illumination. Such subjects reveal the importance Lynch attaches to the subtle variations of light. In keeping with this interest, his still lifes almost all date from the same short period in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At this time, he says, he had a studio with a wonderful, light-flooded window. For the still lifes, he placed arrangements of children's toys and other curios below this window so that they were illuminated from the side. When Lynch gave up this studio and lost his window, he by and large ceased to paint still lifes, though he notes that a new studio, which he is currently building, may allow him to return to this subject.

The tale of Lynch's still lifes underscores a crucial element in his working process. Almost all of his paintings are done directly from life. Most of his landscapes are painting in situ. In inclement weather, which, in Minnesota, means often, he typically works from his car, which he has outfitted with a table, special lights, and a moveable easel. For his night paintings he often clips a flashlight to the visor of the car, covering the flashlight lens with tracing paper to diffuse the light.

BEYOND TIME AND PLACE

Lynch is an artist deeply embedded in his environment. Despite a bit of youthful travel (along with his three months of study in Amsterdam, he trolled around San

Francisco for five years during his self-described “hippie days”), Lynch has chosen to settle close to home. A sense of place permeates even the physical materials of the paintings. A painstaking craftsman, Lynch mixes most of his paints from handmade pigments, many of them gathered from piles of mining residue in the Iron Range where he played as a child. Noting that these minerals are the basis for yellow and red ocher, he reports wryly, “I always get a little iron ore into every painting.”

Lynch's industrial subjects seem particularly rooted in place. He paints the kind of scenes commonly resisted by landscape painters looking for more conventional models of beauty. But Lynch brings out the muscular elegance of stacks of cylindrical towers, the almost surreal quality of the letters of an industrial sign floating in space, the bursts of smoke and steam that partially dissolve the solid geometry of industrial buildings. Such works bear a kinship with those of other masters of the industrial landscape—among them Charles Sheeler, whose paintings of monumental grain elevators and factories heroicized American industry in the first half of the 20th century, and contemporary German artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose photographs turn abandoned industrial buildings from the same era into a form of found sculpture. Like them, Lynch finds beauty where others might see eyesores.

Lynch's paintings are saturated with melancholy—even his nature scenes feel restrained and lonely. He notes laconically that “trees are hard to paint with all those leaves” and says he prefers to depict them at night when they become solid masses of shadow. But for this master painter, the resistance to conventional beauty is



Yard Shanty 1994
oil on panel
12 x 18 inches

clearly more than a matter of technique. In daytime, trees introduce a sense of instability. They are full of flickering light and shattered points of color—all the things the

Impressionists prized because they expressed a world of flux and change. Lynch, by contrast is after

something very different—a world that seems both to have preexisted us and promises to outlast us. The lack of human presence in his paintings accentuates this feeling. He compares his paintings to photographs taken with a long exposure, in which any human who moved through the scene would register at most as a faint streak of light.

But this stability contains a hidden tension. The sense of permanence conveyed by these paintings seems at odds with our sense that such scenes are already vanishing from the modern landscape. When viewing Lynch's streetscapes of tidy white frame houses dominated by a church spire, his empty country roads, his quiet nocturnal main streets lined by one- and two-story storefronts, his deserted rail yards, and his isolated watchtowers, it is hard to shake the sense he is recording a world that already belongs to history.

And yet, in Lynch's paintings, it all feels so real and solid. In a similar way, despite the passage of time and inevitable change, we feel we know Vermeer's *Delft* or Hopper's *Cape Cod* as if we had been there ourselves. Mike Lynch has captured his Minnesota in a form that promises to be just as enduring. ■

Eleanor Heartney is a contributing editor to Art in America and is the author of Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads, Postmodernism, and the forthcoming Postmodern Heretics.

Opposite: *Pillsbury Elevator and Snow* 1993
oil on panel, 9" x 13 1/4 inches

Page 14: *Pioneer Elevator* 1985
pencil, ink, and watercolor, 9 x 12 inches

Page 15: *Power* 2003
oil on panel, 10 x 15 inches



LYNCH





The Artist and the Gallery

For more than 20 years, four or five times a year, Mike Lynch has arrived unannounced at Groveland Gallery with a tidy little bundle under his arm. He has made this cross-town trip to the gallery on his bike, in a variety of (needless to say not new) cars, and on the bus. The bundles contain his latest paintings, each carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine.

These unexpected deliveries have always felt a bit like Christmas to me. While unwrapping the paintings and carefully recording their details in fountain pen on three-by-five-inch index cards, Mike usually unfolds a story or two. I've heard tales of how the weather changed that day in Duluth, about the railroad man he met at that train yard, the diner with cheap breakfast on that trip up north, or the demolition of a shed at a frequently painted Minneapolis elevator. As each painting is unwrapped, it has seemed as if I've opened up a jewel box and discovered another gem or masterpiece.

While the paintings “live” at the gallery, I have the luxury of looking more carefully and leisurely. After more observation and along with those little histories, I always find Mike's masterful paintings have the capacity to reveal both a very personal and quiet intimacy as well as universal sympathy that never fails to be compelling.

Of course, I savor the paintings and the stories, but I also always look forward to being able to pass them along to the many people who admire Mike and his work. It has been immensely satisfying for me to be the “middle man” between Mike and the hundreds of people who love to look at his work. I have been lucky to share the pleasure of discovering Mike's work with his many art enthusiasts and collectors.

Sally Johnson
Director, Groveland Gallery
Minneapolis

Opposite:
Lynch and Johnson
at the gallery.



Lynch draws our attention to the things we live with every day.



Moose Junction 1986
oil on panel
16 x 22 inches

Opposite: *View of St. Paul from Indian Mounds Park* 2002
ink and watercolor study for the
Stassen Office Building commission, St. Paul

Double Take

In Mike Lynch's evocative paintings, one of Minnesota's favorite novelists sees familiar places anew.

By Jon Hassler

Unlike most others of his fans, who are longtime devotees of his work, I came upon the paintings of Mike Lynch only a year ago. It was in the *Star Tribune* that I first saw mention of his name. My attention was drawn to an article concerning

his work in which he said he'd painted a book jacket for Jon Hassler. I wasn't aware of any such jacket and I thought, Who is this imposter?

A week later I received in the mail my first copy of my latest book and on the jacket was Mike Lynch's wonderful rendition of *The Staggerford Flood*. The flood has swamped everything in sight except Agatha McGee's large Victorian house standing on a rise of ground. A boat has pulled up to her door and she is standing in the doorway to welcome her nephew and another man who are getting out of the boat with groceries for the eight people stranded in the house. It is dusk. The scene is lit



dramatically by a full moon not far above the horizon, its light reflected in the water. I have since acquired the original painting of this scene and it hangs over our dining table, so my wife and I can admire it every time we sit down to eat.

I was recently shown a number of Lynch's other paintings, including his stunning rendition of downtown St. Paul that hangs in the lobby of the new Stassen Office Building near the State Capitol. It's a work of enormous size, portraying the city at dusk, with its streetlights and bridge lights burning brightly and reflected in the Mississippi.

As a Sunday painter myself I admire most of all Mike Lynch's use of light and darkness, particularly in scenes it would never have occurred to me to look at twice—say, the cloudy light filtered through a lace curtain and falling across the bed and wardrobe of a seedy hotel room; or the artificial light of a security

Room 431 1995
ink, Chinese white
14 x 10 inches



lamppost playing across the rounded shapes of a gigantic grain elevator; or—my favorite—a solitary street lamp against a pitch black sky illuminating the side view of a saloon, with a car and a couple of pickups parked outside in the snow. This, to me, is so evocative that I can picture again the dozens of similar taverns I used to drive past during my years in northern Minnesota. The bleak light, the frost on the vehicles, and the smoke rising from the chimney tell me that it's a very cold night. This, like most of his work, contains no human figures, and yet you can imagine the human presences inside the building.

This is true of all his work—you see the evidence of people all about. Whether it's trains, trucks, or ships, you know that people are operating them. For example, the exhaust emanating from one of the pickups at the tavern tells me that at least one of the patrons is ready to leave, but he can't pull himself away from the warmth and fellowship he is enjoying at the bar.

Mike Lynch, by his lifelong dedication to his art, makes us see anew the everyday things around us. He draws our attention to the things we live with every day and night, and thus enriches our lives in Minnesota. ■

Jon Hassler's 12 novels include Staggerford, A Green Journey, Grand Opening, and, most recently, The Staggerford Flood (Viking, 2002). He has also published short stories, plays, and essays. He lives in Minneapolis.



Saturday Night at the Palace 1994
ink and watercolor on gray paper
5 1/2 x 9 inches



LYNCH

1-16-94

ST. PAUL - CLEVELAND & GILBERT

Lighting the Way

Mike Lynch is an artist's artist—one who inspires through his work ethic and the fidelity of his vision. Four artists testify.

SHADES OF GRAY

There are days when the early evening light turns a lavender gray and contrasts with a dark skyline. The atmospheric light makes time stand still. It's at those moments, when I see that combination of light and color, that I say, "It's a Lynch." And anyone who knows Mike's work would say the same. He is so identified with this view of landscape that it is almost as if he ordered it up so that he could transfer it to canvas or watercolor.

Going back in time to the first woodcuts and inky drawings of Mike's that I saw at Kilbride-Bradley Gallery in downtown Minneapolis, as an art student in love with abstract expressionist painting and splashing color, I could hardly believe how affected I was by those images of little houses, precisely cut tree branches, and old warehouse buildings with darkened windows, perhaps one lit with a yellow glow.

They were truly dark and gloomy and extremely romantic. They may have held secrets and sad stories, and yet they were also places where I hung out listening to music (often Mike playing his harmonica), drinking beer, talking art all night, feeling within those old walls new and exciting ideas taking shape.

I recall talking to Mike about a particular painting of railroad tracks and grain elevators. He was obsessed with getting the color right. I think at the time I may have teasingly said, "What color?" The gray tones were so subtle. But he has pursued that subtle light and color for all these years, and it is that special quality that comes through in all his work over time and makes one stop and peer momentarily into the quiet evening.

Rochelle Woldorsky
Minneapolis

Opposite:
Snowy Night at Cleveland and Gilbert 1994
oil on panel
10 x 14 inches

STANDING ALONE

My pal Lynch, in his quiet manner, humbly and honestly records today, the old-fashioned way, with pencil, ink, and paint. He is a site-specific painter—real places, real times. Yet his carefully chosen images sketch timeless glimpses. He documents our past, just by being there, alone, by day and—his specialty—night. How lucky we are he paused when we didn't.

We met in the late 1950s in Minneapolis, where the so-called scene was happening at 26th Street and Nicollet Avenue, Dinkytown, and the West Bank. I recall artist George Wright introducing us in Mike's storefront studio at Cedar-Riverside. Mike had, and still has, a "no airs" approach to his work: no whining, no complaining, just a big easel and simple lighting. He works steadily, accurately, getting the light right. He places you right there. He knows that the work either speaks or it doesn't. It must stand alone.

On an old Raleigh three-speed, Mike would head out in the winter night in his humble, well-washed denim and pea coat, searching like Audubon, backpack of sketchbook and watercolors, in pursuit of the elusive view that summed up the night. While others of us were driving home, Mike was by the roadside or back in the alley, bringing it into view. Better to be observer than observed.

Mike is persevering and patient, keeping his overhead down, owing no one. He displays in the gallery with no gladhanding or backslapping, just a modestly priced show. Any of the more than 2,000 people who have purchased a Lynch knows it was a bargain and considers himself lucky to have one.

Tom Attridge,
with Maija Morton
St. Paul

Opposite:
The Horn Towers 1997
oil on panel
35 x 50 inches



MIKE AT NIGHT

It was Mike Lynch's gift for painting the night that first made me feel a kinship with his art.

Lynch seems drawn to these marginal states of visibility where a light source is a lamppost or a street sign. His works are philosophical in their attraction to the darkness and the forlornness of these places, which are nowhere and everywhere. Sure, it's Minnesota, but it could as well be anywhere truckers and tourists might go. Artificial stars entice the traveler to stop and eat and rest. Lynch's nights are sheltering. It's never a sense of dread that inhabits these works but rather a celebration of these modest nocturnal spectacles of the road.

Lynch's compositions examine a random world of signs and haphazard structures that come to light in the night. Lynch records these humble spectacles as if they were monumental. In a way, Lynch's paintings resemble religious narratives that pay homage to the spectacle of artificial light, giving us back a portion of the night landscape.

But this is tough stuff. It represents the limits of our ability to use the night and its space. Lynch celebrates the faint illumination we manage to create as a metaphor for the incompleteness of our conquest of the night. In the darkness, nature is in control. The painter is a puny figure, merely bringing back the evidence from the darkened field.

What Lynch finds is a curious poesy, a sort of song of incompleteness. Everything is in need of repair or replacement, but it's getting very late and we'd better head for home.

Frank Gaard
Minneapolis

Opposite:
Buckhorn Bar 1992
oil on panel
12 x 16 inches



LYNCH

NIGHT MUSIC

I met Mike and his work when I was in college. My mother, a landscape painter, took me to one of his openings. I was studying biology at the time but remembered one painting in particular of the Hiawatha grain elevator district in Minneapolis, in what seemed to be a cold February morning, with a heavy magenta sunrise washing the columns of elevators. I wanted to see more.

I did. Through my brief biology and scientific photography career, I kept visiting Mike's work. In seeing more of his night work, I wanted to do more of my own night photography but in a manner that captured the range of tones and feeling I experienced in Mike's work. Although photography could never approach the range of tone or color that painting can provide, I'm sure anyone looking at my work will see Mike's influence.

For me the pieces that are so profound are those of the late twilight and early dawn. The sky, the land forms, the tonality, the color—all coming together like the best of jazz. You keep wanting to look at it. It never tires; it always feels the same. Mike captures the essence of why artists do art in the first place—because they have to; not much else makes sense.

Mike Lynch is an understated man of few words who, I think, truly believes: Why talk about your art? Just do it.

Chris Faust
St. Paul

Opposite:
Railroad Property 1994
oil on panel
9 x 12 inches





could get across
to roof. Gaffer taped
crack in ladder.
Nervous about going
on roof. Made
sketch of ladder &
interior of top floor.
Heard someone coming up
iron stairs from below.
Oh Oh I thought. Girls
voices - good - I thought.
less likely to get killed.
2 girls - about 13 yr old -
came around corner
under Elevator corner.
They went up ladder
onto roof. Skinny
enough so they could
have squeezed thru
opening without
removing the vent
panel. Said they
were "crawling".
I could hear them
on the roof.
Went up ladder & looked.
They were doing jump-
ing jacks. I said:
be careful. Oh yes,
we are.

to hand me wrench I had dropped on roof. She
places on her feet. I said: "Smile"
the caps. She said: "Caps don't
work as much as you think."

July 12
Dinner
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Notes from the Field

Excerpts from Mike Lynch's painting journals, replete with sketches, diagrams, dreams, weather reports, ruminations, and stories chronicling the life of a painter.



DULUTH, FEBRUARY 6, 1992

Moved into cheaper room 353: \$44 a week. Kind of a depressing room after the luxury of 328. Ceiling damaged, stained, tiles missing with dark ugly patches from water damage. Sink stained and grimy. Floor dirty with gobs of dust here and there. . . . Knob missing on dresser, dirt and filth of past residents, broken smoke alarm—but what the heck, it's cheap. . . . Lot of bother to get this room. Have to be “assertive.”

DULUTH, FEBRUARY 8, 1992

Out later and ink froze. Ink ruined. Sketched up on hill over Munger apts. Then over in Superior—west edge of town late afternoon. Then south Superior: some highrises catch light from street lamp down block—black shadows look like woodcut. Clear black sky, cold bright stars. Some days nothing seems to go right, then it turns out not as bad as you thought.

DULUTH, FEBRUARY 9, 1992

Worked with dome light in car. Man in truck with dog in back stopped—asked if I was all right. “Sure,” I said. “Just painting a watercolor.” Showed him blank sketchbook with wet page. He looked at me strangely—drove on—no time to explain—desperation! Paper curling, water running everywhere, dark coming fast. Felt like in the cockpit of a small plane going down. Got color wash on. Dark. Drove back. . . . Finish picture in hotel room from memory.

MINNEAPOLIS, FEBRUARY 13, 1992

Got back about 5:30 last evening. Family glad to see me. Especially Tommy. I gave him his present: a little figure of the “Flash” in red suit with lightning bolts on it. We build a haunted house with cardboard and Lincoln logs. . . . Later Ann says it's probably good I got back a day early. Tommy's been worried. In kindergarten one of the kids' dads was shot dead by police. That's three dads gone in six months. One suicide, one sick, one killed. “All the dads are dying,” the kids say. The news hasn't been good. “Well, honey,” I say, “I'm back.”

MINNEAPOLIS, MARCH 23, 1994

The [funding] panel came yesterday to look at the artwork. They stayed about 10 minutes—about the same as in '85. . . . We had some people over last night to view the “show” and Ann baked some bread, cake, etc. Quite a bit of time—about a week—was spent setting up the display of work, etc. Seemed like a big effort. The feeling I have now is depressed.

DULUTH, APRIL 28, 1994

The snow finally started to come just as I was finishing up the drawing about 8:30 p.m. Earlier, someone called police and a cop came and checked me out. Said people worried about sex criminals—what with children about, a stranger in the neighborhood sitting in a car, etc. I said it happens all the time—no blame. Kids did come to see my drawing, looking through car window. I imagined worried neighbors peering through slightly parted curtains—but what could I do? Sketching draws kids like flies. If you try to drive them away, they end up throwing rocks at you.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
SEPTEMBER 20, 1994**

There's a mathematics and logic to [a picture] which must be apprehended intuitively, as in how to simplify, how to represent. . . . There's always a degree of failure or imperfection, i.e., the reality is always greater than the representation. What then is the picture's value? Its value is that it brings the viewer an opportunity to see the scene divested of its physical presence; like at a movie, we participate one step removed.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
DECEMBER 14, 1994**

Function of art: We see a thing removed or detached from the practical mode of everyday life—see the factory not as something we go to to work—but through a glass, as it were, as a place where we have worked—as if one were outside oneself—a ghost—and could see. And one is free from the humdrum preoccupations which capture our attention most of the time—and it's very interesting to see life this way.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
JANUARY 12, 1995**

So much of the work is unexciting, uninteresting even. It seems that it's just not in the cards to be always having fun! This seems to strike many people of my generation as a personal affront, especially the artists. It's hard to feel one is doing anything worthwhile if the activity of it feels so mundane. . . . But of course certain things require sustained effort, and sustained effort quickly gets tiresome. . . .

Sloth, despair, and idle talk! Ah-ha! If one were great, then maybe it'd be worth making a big effort, but to make an effort and remain merely a bit player. . . that's disheartening for sure. "Why try?" asks my generation. And the true heroes aren't heroes at all, just plain mundane people getting by most of the time without near as much attention as artists get.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
APRIL 21, 1995**

Sketched site of demolition of the elevator that fed into the old linseed oil factory (Spencer-Kellogg). Watchman came down that long corridor. . . . "Kind of a lonely job, ain't it?" I said as he approached. . . . Watchman says, "Company doesn't want people taking pictures, and drawing pictures is similar." He says, "I don't want to give you a hard time. I'm just saying what company policy is." I say, "Well, I don't want to give you a hard time either, but this is a public street."

"Well, maybe not." . . . "I'm gonna keep on, I think. Call the cops if you want, or whatever." Not a bad fellow, just trying to do his job.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
MAY 12, 1995**

The focus on fame and the individual persona of the artist draws attention away from the quality of the art that exists regardless of whether or not the artist is known.

**DULUTH,
JUNE 2, 1995**

Difficulty with these spring greens and sunny colors. One's picture becomes disjointed. There's a precise relationship between colors in sun and in shadow, I suppose—but that global or overall relationship is hard to discern in the myriad joyous, seductive details which—translated into the picture imperfectly—create disharmony, spottiness. To avoid this two or three colors [are] better than 15 or 27.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
JANUARY 10, 1996**

In art we must leave closure and finality—finishing—to forces beyond one's control. But we can give it a good launch or birth—that is, effort in that direction counts for something.

**MINNEAPOLIS,
JUNE 3, 1996**

I got the [McKnight] fellowship! I was quite surprised. This will help us financially. . . . 9-12 p.m. went sketching around Union Railyard, Kurth Elevator, etc. Sketched some cars, trucks, railroad engines, watchtower and a sort of trailer parked at the site of the old yard shanty. Hate to admit it in a way, but it would seem that just getting that fellowship encouraged me to go out and get some work done.

52

June 20, Thursday, On French
3RD day - at a lake - granary
a bit of sand - child
wind sighing through
on a hot coal and bird
put his shoes on. The
did not. We had a





Painting Media 1980
oil on panel
16 x 20 inches



Locomotive 1983
oil on panel
22 x 16 inches

Sketches

Notes from friends and fellow artists.

Mike Lynch is one of the only artists I know who can draw and paint motor vehicles. Not just cars and trucks, but an '83 Mustang under a Duluth streetlight . . . a battered oil truck in all its bulk and homeliness . . . a toy coupe on an old box, each one's personality observed with breathtaking skill and utter humility. Mike serves up the heartbreaking beauty of real stuff, making it ours just for the looking.

Thomas O'Sullivan
Curator and Writer
St. Paul

Mike's paintings, drawings, and prints are a sincere reflection of his personality: quiet, unassuming, and profoundly sensitive.

Carl Oltvedt
Professor of Art
Minnesota State University, Moorhead

I can't think of an artist more deserving of the Distinguished Artist Award. Mike Lynch's vision has opened up for all of us a sense of the beauty and humanity in the most mundane and vernacular structures and surroundings in our environment.

Jim Kielkopf
Painter
St. Paul

I own about 17 Mike Lynch paintings. One is a larger painting of the Pillsbury mill at night, which has a small smear at the very bottom of the canvas. When I asked him about it, he said it started to rain as he was painting, and the smear comes from a raindrop that hit the canvas. I would never have him repair it.

Lawrence Perlman
Collector
Minneapolis

In an art world where sophistic verbiage has become increasingly rampant, Mike is content to let his work speak for itself, which it does most eloquently.

Tom Cowette
Associate Professor of Art
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

As an admirer of Mike Lynch's painting for more than three decades, I have most respected his command of his technique and his unwavering artistic integrity. He has managed to evade the hustle, trends, and hype of art world careerism and has emerged his own person and artist with his distinct, highly personal and poetic vision.

Ted Hartwell
Curator of Photographs
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

**Mike's pictures clean
my eyes and remind me
of what a daily mystery
we are in here.**

Greg Brown
Singer-Songwriter
Hacklebarney, Iowa



Smitty's Bar 1992
oil on panel
13½ x 22 inches



Rail Yard Nocturne 1992
oil on panel
16 x 22 inches

Mike's work sneaks up on you. The stillness of his paintings and drawings is rich; the grayness is clear. The silence of his urbanscapes breathes. You begin to feel Mike's darkness and mystery before you see it, like the drumming of a grouse.

Mason Riddle
Critic
St. Paul

Though deserved, I'm not sure the appellation "distinguished" would sit well with Mike, since his middle name is pretty much "nitty-gritty." I know his Minnesota well. He's given us its guts, gutsiness. He's a wizard of darkness but all anti-magic when it comes to dusk. When the twilight has drained itself of all lyricism, Mike's palette goes on the attack. Even air fraught with odious humidity finds a home in his inks and paints. If ever a painter was a real contrarian, Mike's the one.

Stuart Klipper
Photographer
Minneapolis

Mike was still in high school—and obviously talented—when he was my student at Grand Marais Art Colony. His interest in art was complete; his goal was fixed; and it has never varied.

Byron Bradley
Artist and Former Gallery Owner
Grand Marais, Minnesota

His subject matter is seemingly narrow but, as with all great artists, what he chooses to depict is not as important or as interesting as how he chooses to depict it.

Don McNeil
Curator, Corporate Art Collection
General Mills, Minneapolis

I own eight oils, 14 watercolors, and four pencil drawings by Mike, each of which I greatly cherish. This spring, viewing some Edward Hopper pieces in the Whitney Museum in New York City, my partner commented, “Mike Lynch is 10 times better than Hopper.” Believing that this might smack of hyperbole, I ventured, “Well, at least twice as good.”

Gerald T. Flom
Collector
Minneapolis

His greatest gift to us is his eye for the rugged and unnoticed and his ability to reveal the beauty that is present there.

Neil Sherman
Painter
Minneapolis



Harbor Lights 1983
oil on panel
16 x 22 inches



Mountie 1980
oil on canvas
36 x 48 inches

My Brother, the Artist

Mike is my younger brother by three years. When we were kids, we would draw on rainy days. Mike soon got better, a lot better. He liked to draw pictures of tumbledown shacks, bent light poles, and what other people might regard as just plain junk. He learned how to make paints with rocks taken from the dumps that surround the towns on the Iron Range—the piles of overburden removed to get at the iron ore. They have iron compounds and a lot of color. He studied it, got a mortar and pestle, and had lots of fun doing it.

When I was going to the University of Minnesota, Mike would show up at the door from time to time, saying he hadn't eaten in a couple of days and asking for a couple of bucks. I'm sure he spent most of it on art supplies, because artists don't really have to eat, do they?

Jack Lynch
Hibbing, Minnesota





LYNCH

Mike Lynch

Selected Exhibitions

Minnesota Museum of American Art

"Minnesota Landscapes," 2003

"American Still Lives," 1992

The Annex at Groveland Gallery

"Nocturnes," group exhibition, 2003

"Thirty Years of Prints and Drawings,"
solo exhibition, 2000

Groveland Gallery

"Nocturnes," group exhibition, 1999

Solo exhibitions, 1997, 1995, 1994,
1993, 1991, 1989, 1985

Minneapolis Institute of Arts

"Night: Mike Lynch and
Chris Faust," 2000

"The Academic Dialogue," 1991

"Five Painters," 1981

"Prints and Drawings," solo show,
1975

Minneapolis College of Art & Design

"Eight McKnight Artists," 1997,
1988, 1984

University of Minnesota

"Landmark Edition Prints," 1991

Duluth Art Institute

"Lighthouse Sketches," 1988

Solo exhibition, 1986

Minnesota Historical Society, J.J. Hill House

"Minnesota Artists," 1983

Walker Art Center

"Drawings by Minnesota Artists,"
1964

Kilbride-Bradley Gallery

Solo shows, 1963, 1960

Collections (partial listing)

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Walker
Art Center, Minnesota Museum of
Art, Minnesota Historical Society,
University of Minnesota, 3M,
Chemical Bank of New York,
Honeywell, Minneapolis Federal
Reserve Bank, US Bank, Wells Fargo,
General Mills, Dorsey & Whitney,
Faegre & Benson, Cargill, Minnesota
Life, St. Paul Cos., Hospital
Corporation of America, Minnesota
Department of Transportation, and
others, including private collections.

Opposite:
County Road C 1992
oil on panel
14 ¼ x 22 inches



Mike Lynch: A Painter's Life

1938

Born Harry Michael Lynch on April 14 in Hibbing, Minnesota, to Grace and John Lynch, a mine patrolman. Older brother, Jack, was born in 1934.

1955

Studies painting with Birney Quick and Byron Bradley at Town Hall Art Colony in Grand Marais, Minnesota. Spends first summer in University of Minnesota-Duluth Summer Art Program, studying with artist-in-residence Fletcher Martin.



Above:
John F. Lynch, 1934

1957

Graduates from Hibbing High School; again studies with Quick and Bradley. Receives First Premium in Art at St. Louis County Fair.

1957-1958

Attends Minneapolis School of Art (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design), studying with painter Eric Austen Erickson.



Above:
Pop, Jack, and Mike, 1941

1960

First solo exhibition, at Kilbride-Bradley Gallery in Minneapolis.

1963

Studies printmaking at the Rijks Academy in Amsterdam. Second one-person show at Kilbride-Bradley Gallery.

1968

Receives first prize in printmaking at Minnesota State Fair; wins again in 1972 and 1989.

1979

Begins relationship with Groveland Gallery.

1983

Receives first of three McKnight Artist Fellowships (others in 1987, 1996).

1984

Creates cover and illustrations for Margaret Hasse's *Stars Above, Stars Below* (New Rivers Press).

1985

Receives Bush Foundation Fellowship. Publication of Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days* (Viking), for which Lynch created chapter headings and illustrations. Release of Greg Brown's *In the Dark with You* (Red House Records), for which Lynch illustrated the album cover.



Left:
Lynch on 10th Avenue Bridge,
1961

1991

Receives Minnesota State Arts Board Visual Art Fellowship.

1992

Artist-in-Residence at St. John's University, Colleveville, Minnesota.

1993

Awarded first prize in painting at Minnesota State Fair.

1997

Self-publishes two illustrated diaries of his work, *Gold Medel [sic] Flour: Notes from a Painting Trip Journal* and *A Few Notes on Grain Elevators, and Notes from Painting Trip Journal*.



Left:
Mike Lynch,
1970s

Right:
Ann and
Mike Lynch,
2003

2002

Completes major commission for State of Minnesota Percent for Arts Program, *View of St. Paul from Indian Mounds Park*, a mural in the Stassen Office Building in St. Paul. Publication of Jon Hassler's novel *The Staggerford Flood* (Viking), with Lynch's illustration on the jacket.

2003

Resides in South Minneapolis with wife, Ann, and sons Tom and Sven; Bonnie Lynch and Jenny Lynch, daughters from a previous marriage, live in California.



About the Award

Reviewing nominations for the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award provides an occasion to think about what it means to be an artist in Minnesota. Artists often have specific reasons for being here. Some are from here and have no impetus to leave. Others find a hospitable working environment here, and as they do their work the meaning of the place deepens.

But doing the work isn't the same as living off it. For a few, those two go hand in hand; but for many others, it's a struggle. So what does it mean to make a living as an artist? Is it notoriety, and, if so, to whom? Other artists? Historians? Is it money, and, if so, how much? One sale? A thousand? These questions have no set answer. But certainly what constitutes a "distinguished artist" in Minnesota differs from most other places.

In Minnesota artists earn distinction not mainly through fame and fortune but despite them. In staying here, they enrich our lives, dig deeply into their work, enhance our culture, and influence the next generations of artists who, in turn, continue the tradition.

This year's Distinguished Artist, Mike Lynch, is a good example. He is revered among artists, collected by corporations and individual clients, honored with regional awards, but hardly well known. He chooses to

remain faithful to the realist tradition and to live by his art, even if it means hardship. It often has. Yet his vision and his work grow richer with time.

The McKnight Distinguished Artist Award recognizes a generation of artists who, like Lynch, have made the most of their formidable talents here among us. They have founded and/or strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, attracted audiences and patrons, and made Minnesota culturally vibrant.

The Distinguished Artist Award, which includes a \$40,000 stipend, goes to one artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. A panel of people knowledgeable about Minnesota's cultural history selects the recipient. For their thoughtful deliberations, our thanks go to panelists Linda Hoeschler, former executive director of the American Composers Forum; Linda Myers, executive director of The Loft Literary Center; Dale Schatzlein, director of Northrup Auditorium at the University of Minnesota; and Stewart Turnquist, coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Neal Cuthbert
Program Director, Arts
The McKnight Foundation

McKnight Distinguished Artists

Emilie Buchwald	2 0 0 2
Dale Warland	2 0 0 1
Robert Bly	2 0 0 0
Warren MacKenzie	1 9 9 9
Dominick Argento	1 9 9 8

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Mark Luinenburg; page 42, Lynch on bridge, Ray Pike;
page 43, Lynch, 1970s, Rochelle Woldorsky

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ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Founded in 1953 and endowed by William L. McKnight and Maude L. McKnight, the Foundation has assets of approximately \$1.6 billion and granted about \$87 million in 2002. Annually the Foundation directs about 10 percent of its funding to improve the quality and accessibility of the arts in Minnesota. Mr. McKnight was one of the early leaders of the 3M Company, although the Foundation is independent of 3M.

