

The creative evolution of abstract artist Cory McBee

Breaking Barriers

By Melissa Hayes



Courtesy Trager Contemporary

A graphic designer, Cory McBee recently returned to her original love of painting

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Hidden Messages

Aug. 30–Oct. 7

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Trager Contemporary

577 King St. Downtown
tragercontemporary.com

"It's been an emotionally transformative summer," says artist Cory McBee, whose latest collection debuts at Trager Contemporary gallery this Thurs. Aug. 30. The transformation shows in her work: You won't find the delicate landscapes that the award-winning painter is best known for at her upcoming solo show. Instead, she's revealing a different side of herself with 10 pieces, collectively titled *Hidden Messages*.

The paintings are filled with bold colors and striking geometric angles. As the title suggests, each piece incorporates concealed messages: impassioned words, angry words, song lyrics, intentions; the exorcised words are partially hidden beneath the layers of paint. "I used these pieces as a way to write out and express some of the things I've been thinking and feeling," she says. The collection seems representative of McBee's journey to the confident abstractionist she's become. She had to work through the layers of her psyche to create what she says is "the first body of work that I've created knowing who I was while I created it."

McBee, who studied studio art at College of Charleston, worked professionally as a graphic designer for 15 years before returning to her passion for painting. When asked about her hiatus, she said her decision was a question of practicality: Do you pursue purely

what you love, or do you create something that sells? "There are ways to be an artist and to be successful," she says, "but sometimes you have to determine what that success means for you. At a time, I needed a paycheck more, so I was a graphic designer and made a decent living. It's still a passion of mine, but it's a different passion."

But when the opportunity came to teach graphic arts and design at North Charleston High School, she decided it was time to give painting another go. "I didn't have any excuses anymore," she laughs. "I had a steady paycheck. I had benefits. I had time off in the summer. There was nothing in my way." She set to work creating her signature coastal landscapes: ethereal abstracts set in airy jewel tones and pastels.

She was creating beautiful work, but something was missing. "The landscapes are safe," she says. "You can look at them and understand them to some degree. Now that I've settled into who I am as an artist, I'm beginning to take more risks with the material. I think with age and wisdom, you become less afraid to fail. You care less about what other people think. You can't really teach that to someone. You just have to learn it." Her latest collection developed from a desire to take her work to the next level — and from dealing with a difficult summer. "I didn't do anything else this summer except focus on this collection," she says. "The more you practice, the more you push yourself. I'd been pushing myself to try something new." Experimenting in her studio one day, she struggled with a piece she was working on and painted an expletive across the canvas in her frustration. A couple of deep breaths later, she set to painting over the piece, but the word was still barely visible beneath the layers: a hidden message.



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McBee began to view her craft as a therapeutic act instead of creating in search of perfection. She wasn't comparing herself to other artists. She wasn't overthinking technique. She was finally pouring her soul onto the canvas. "Fear is so debilitating," she says. "The fear of failure. The fear that you're going to make something that's ugly. I think taking chances is huge. I feel like this is coming from me, and it took a while to get there. It's been a lifetime journey." And when the fear creeps in, there's always a dance party. McBee has become known for "dancing out" any creative roadblocks. "Music has always been a way to get out of my head," she says.

McBee's paintings have been displayed at Trager Contemporary since it opened in May. She says of owners Kelly and Josiah Trager, "They're just the nicest people, so sweet and so giving. Their vision for their gallery is different from anyone else's. They have a refreshing mix of some funky things. It's a cool space." For McBee, it's an ideal gallery to debut her creations. She hopes that the ambiguity of the collection leads to meaningful, personal connections for viewers. "Someone will look at one of the paintings and see one word, but then someone else will see a completely different word," she says. "I hope people see the things that they need to see, that it becomes theirs. For the most part, nobody has been able to guess what they really say which is kind of fun — and I'm not telling."



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For a chance to meet McBee, an artist's reception with live music and refreshments will be held at Trager Contemporary on Sept. 7 and Oct. 5 from 6–9 p.m.

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Hidden Messages @ Trager Contemporary
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