Master of Landscapes and Missouri Journeys

by Barbara MacRobie

Never before in the 30-year history of the Missouri Arts Awards has there been a double whammy like this—when the Individual Artist honoree of one year has been independently selected to create the signature image of the poster and program of another year. But if anyone was going to earn that two-pronged honor, it’s not surprising that it was Billyo O’Donnell. Not only has he become recognized as one of the foremost landscape painters in the entire country, but throughout his career he has celebrated his native state, most notably in his Painting Missouri project when he created a painting in every one of our state’s counties and the City of St. Louis.

Moreover, Billyo is well known as being affable, modest, and unfailingly generous in sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm. As Tina Magill, director of the Margaret Harwell Art Museum in Poplar Bluff, wrote when helping to nominate Billyo as the 2012 Individual Artist, “Never before have my staff and I enjoyed such an exemplary experience with an artist who is dedicated to promoting our beautiful, culturally diverse state in such an honest and sensitive manner. Mr. O’Donnell is an extraordinary gentleman and a master painter.”

A few of us on the Missouri Arts Council staff had the pleasure of talking in depth with Billyo when he came to our office in downtown St. Louis to sign hundreds of copies of the 2013 Missouri Arts Awards poster that features his painting Round Bales, Livingston County. He told us what it’s been like to make a living as an artist, to be devoted to a style of painting long spurned by galleries, and to take his easel and oils out to paint en plein air—“in the open air”—in wind and weather.
A love of nature from the start

Billyo's journeys began on a farm in Warren County near the Missouri River, about 70 miles west of St. Louis. There he grew up in a family of nine children. He likes to describe his childhood as "a Huck Finn kind of life"—roaming the forests, hunting, fishing, sleeping outside on hot summer nights.

It was then that his aunt gave him the nickname—Billy for William, O for O'Donnell—that he liked so much he adopted it as his actual first name. "The fun thing," he told us, "is that the word is also slang for 'larger than life.' Here we say, 'it's raining cats and dogs.' You go to England and they'll say, 'It's raining billy-o.'"

Billyo has not only always loved nature but has seen it with an artist's eye.

"I remember being just fascinated looking at the river banks and the way the stones were washed," he said. He made sculptures out of river clay—most of which were promptly demolished in mud-ball fights with his brothers and sisters. By the time he went to college in Springfield at Missouri State University, he knew he wanted his degree to be in art.

"When I graduated in 1980, though," he said, "I realized how much I lacked in visual knowledge. So I spent five years traveling across the country on weekends and vacations going to museums and studying paintings. I would look at them to see the scale of the brushstrokes, the color, the light—then when I'd come back home I would emulate those things and try to learn from them."

Billyo was based at that time in the St. Louis area, where he still lives and which he considers an ideal jumping-off place for travel. "When you put St. Louis on a map and draw a 12-hour driving distance around it," he said, "you've got so much in all directions. You've got Houston, Minneapolis, Denver, Washington, D.C., and all the great museums in between those areas.

"Oftentimes my friends and I would get into a car on Friday night after work, drive all night, get to D.C. at seven, eat breakfast, see an art show, eat lunch, get back in the car and get home at midnight. That way you don't have to pay for a room!"

He's still at it. "For my birthday," he said, "I drove to New York to see the Sorolla paintings. I left there at noon and got back to Missouri at 4:30 in the morning." He doesn't see anything extraordinary about this. "The great thing about driving that I try to tell people is, your thoughts are freed!" he said. "There's something about the pattern of the road—your mind goes to all these great places."

He's also still eagerly appreciating other artists' work. "I always like to go through an exhibit twice. The first time I'm just in awe of the artist. I let myself be taken by the beauty and the power of the subject and the way the artist portrayed it. Then I walk through again and start breaking it down and looking at how the artist did things."
Painting unfashionably

Joaquin Sorolla, whose paintings Billyo enjoyed on that lightning birthday trip, was a Spanish painter in the late 19th and early 20th centuries especially noted for his vivid depictions of landscapes and daily life. On other recent trips, Billyo has gone to exhibits featuring Norman Rockwell, Winslow Homer, and Western muralist Edgar Alwin Payne. He is inspired not only by these representational artists but by those who create abstract art—though his career vividly illustrates the impact of fashions in the art world.

“For years, I couldn’t get my work into a gallery to save my life,” he said. “Everything had to be abstract. It would be real easy to say, okay I’ll do that kind of art, but I felt as though my integrity would change.”

Instead, he painted the landscapes and cityscapes he loved on his free time, endlessly entranced. “People have been inspired by the land around them from way back,” he said. “People believed in spirits of the land, magical places. And how many of us still have our own special places?”

Billyo’s day job was in the art department of Maritz, a company that creates employee motivation and customer loyalty programs.

“I did a lot of abstract art in school and really enjoyed it. I love the concepts and theory. But it wasn’t the direction I wanted to go,” he said. “So when I got out of school, the only thing that made sense to me in the art world, if I was going to pursue what made me happy, was commercial art.

“A lot of people have a standard concept of what commercial work is. But at Maritz there was total freedom. I could experiment, do funky things—it was a big plus for me.”

It was a happy 13 years. Then the company eliminated its entire in-house art department. Billyo and 129 others lost their jobs. “Just at that time,” he said, “the California Art Club had asked me to this big event, where they invite 100 artists from California and only five artists from elsewhere in the country. You’d come in and paint for a week, and then show the paintings. I had just been let go, I couldn’t really afford the trip, but on a whim, I decided I might as well do it.”

At the event, Billyo’s work was seen by representatives of the premier gallery in southern California—which then picked up his work. “They sold a lot of paintings of mine—it was absolutely amazing!” he said. Exactly when he needed it, he had gotten his big break.

But that didn’t mean he rocketed to fame and (still elusive) fortune.

“Getting paintings accepted in Missouri was a gradual process,” he said. “For a while the only place I could get into was the Kodner Gallery in Clayton, because they carried the dead artists and I painted a little bit like that. Some of these collectors would come in, look at my work, and say, ‘Boy, that’s really a beautiful piece, I like that, who was this guy?’ “Actually…he’s alive!”
Even today, art that is representational and deliberately beautiful can be looked on askance. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ll be with someone who’ll say they collect contemporary art, and what they mean is more modern-looking,” he said.

Twenty years ago, the dichotomy was much more severe. Billy therefore became determined to change the perception of landscape painting in Missouri. In 1996, he created the Forest Park Paint-Out with the St. Louis Art Guild. More than 80 artists turned out to paint *en plein air* in the park. In 2000, he founded Artists Along the Katy Trail, an annual month-long event during which artists painted along the 240-mile rails-to-trails state park. “I thought, if I create a community of landscape painters, then the galleries will have to show us!” he said.

Painting Missouri

During the first Katy Trail event, Billy met a young journalist named Karen Glines. Inspired by a book of stories and paintings of Indiana, she’d had a brainstorm: why not do something similar for Missouri? She could write the short essays, and Billy could do the paintings. How about one set for each of Missouri’s 114 counties plus the City of St. Louis? Billy loved the idea.

Seven years, 150,000 miles, two worn-out minivans, and innumerable adventures later, the project was complete. The University of Missouri Press published the exquisite coffee-table book *Painting Missouri: The Counties en Plein Air*, and Billy built nine special crates to send the full set of paintings on the road.

The *Painting Missouri* exhibit has now traveled to St. Louis, Fulton, Kansas City, Poplar Bluff, Hannibal, Fayette, and St. Joseph. “At the Kansas City Public Library,” he remembers, “it was the highest turnout they’d ever had for an art exhibit. People even came in by bus from Wichita and Topeka. I hadn’t thought anyone from outside the state would care!”

The theme of counties has resonated powerfully. “I think people identify with counties because they denote a region,” Billy said. “Look at the magnificent county courthouses—you talk about pride, that’s what those are about. How often I’ve seen that when someone from Missouri opens the book, the first thing they do is go to their county.”

Billy and Karen were honored for their book in 2009 with the Governor’s Humanities Award. “I can’t say enough about Karen,” Billy said. “She’s one of those people who just keeps on giving and giving.”
Challenges and joys of painting outdoors

There are 115 oil paintings in the Painting Missouri collection, but Billyo painted at least 300 to get there. “A lot of those got painted over, a lot I just wasn’t happy with, and some of them I still have,” he said. “For the book I wanted a variety of compositions, seasons, and times of day. When I got something that turned out to be a great painting, that trumped it all.

“And this may sound kind of crazy, but I was just trying to get a really good portrait of Missouri. I can’t tell you how many times I painted a soybean field until I got one that looked absolutely beautiful. When a painting is reference-based, you can’t just be a copyist of what’s there—you have to have expression and emotion in it.”

Capturing nature on its own turf instead of in the studio comes with unique challenges. In Billyo’s quest to paint Missouri, he has met challenges from subzero temperatures to car breakdowns. The technical aspects are also tricky. To learn to paint a dawn or sunset, he said, “You basically have to do a thousand bad paintings! That changing light is a real challenge. A lot of the old classical French painters would go out and paint between 10 and 3 because the sun moved very little.”

No matter the challenges, he wouldn’t have it any other way. “I can paint still lifes. I can paint in the studio. But to me there’s nothing like being on location, in life, in a moment, creating.”

Billyo cherishes memories of creating Painting Missouri like the man in Glasgow who told Billyo he had met his wife many years ago when she was painting the same street, the third-generation melon farmer in Scott County who talked with him about seeds and soil while Billyo painted the melon stand, the children in Greenfield who watched him painting the opera house and then asked if they could be in the painting (he said yes, and they are).

“I was in downtown St. Louis once to paint buildings, on a really cold day,” he recalls. “I parked my van and set up in a spot. This older gentleman walked up and was watching me. I started to paint something and I wiped it off, and I started to paint something else and I wiped it off, because it’s really hard to get the composition of the buildings right. I wiped it off a third time. It just wasn’t working. And this gentleman said, ‘You don’t know what the hell you’re doin’, do you?’ And I said, ‘No…I don’t! I’m just tryin’.‘ So after about an hour I pack up my gear and go back to my van, and there’s an envelope on the windshield—I’m thinking, no, I got a ticket! But it was a note from that gentleman that referenced our conversation, with a twenty dollar bill inside the envelope. He wrote, ‘Keep trying.’”
Best time to be an artist
As someone who has always held onto his personal vision, Billyo believes there is far more room for artists to flourish within their own individuality than ever before. "I believe this is the greatest time in the history of the world to be an artist because there is so much more variety and information out there," he said.

"There are so many different museums across the country and different shows happening, that no longer do three or four artists create a look and everyone else has to live or die by that look. It’s like when there were few magazines, Life and The Saturday Evening Post had a tremendous impact on the culture. Now there are thousands of little magazines.

"It’s the same with galleries. You can still see lots of modern art, but you can see everything else too. If you as an artist become the best at what you’re at, you can find a gallery.

"We’ve seen the end of the superstar. We no longer have a Picasso, one giant who overshadows us all. Any style of art you pick out—pastels, silhouette art—you won’t have one star, you’ll have 40. And a lot of people have more of a regional influence.

"Then there’s the death of the critic! There are still some good critics who say great things, but there isn’t any one critic who stands out who has any impact at all.

"With books and websites, we have so much information available to us. There are so many biographies and autobiographies, we know what an artist’s life is like. Not only that, we can look into their materials and techniques and methods. That’s why you’re starting to see a lot of artists being inspired by art of the past."

Finding bliss while making a living
When Billyo teaches classes and workshops, talking with his students about how an artist lives as as important as explaining how to mix colors.

“Sometimes I meet people at my workshops who have a marketing background and think they’re going to make tons of money. Because most artists are horrible marketers, but they’ll be good at it.

“I always do this little talk. Imagine you’ve sold five paintings for a thousand dollars apiece. You’re thinking, man, I’m doing really well! But then the gallery gets half of that. And you bought frames, which cost $200 each. That leaves you $1,500. Then you figure to create those five paintings, you probably did 10.

Your paints, your panels, your gas—that’s going to cost $50 a painting—that’s another $500 right there. And now you’ve got to go out and buy more supplies. That leaves you a thousand dollars. And that’s not even counting taxes. Or your time. And there’s no guarantee.

“I try to explain….There’s a big leap going from here—as he talked, he put his hands together far to his left—“just doing your art for yourself and really enjoying it, and way over here”—he moved his hands far to his right—“making a living from it. Do you really need to make a living with it or can you just enjoy it?
"I made that leap all of a sudden because Maritz let me go and I got picked up by this major gallery. But I was going to be content the rest of my life just doing paintings and working a regular job. As long as I made enough money to get by, I was happy.

“And that’s key: everyone has their own standard of comfort, and only you can answer what your standard is. Mine is very low! People ask me, have you suffered for your art? And I say no, because though I’ve had to do without a lot of things, I never had them to begin with.”

Even though he is now nationally renowned with an ever-increasing list of honors, and in demand as a teacher, paying the bills as a painter “still has always got that up and down,” he said. “That’s why every time I sell a painting, I do the happy dance.

“But a lot of people think I make a lot of money! It’s like what happened to a friend of mine—he’s out painting in Tower Grove Park, and another artist walks up and says, ‘Oh, you plein air paint? Do you know the artist Billyo?’ And my friend says, yes, and the other guy goes, ‘I hear he owns a villa in Italy!’”

Billyo may paint villas in Italy—in face he is teaching a workshop in Tuscany this October—but the only home he owns a log cabin that used to be his grandmother’s. This is where he and his wife, Peggy, have reared their now-grown children, Megan, Erin, and Timothy.

“It’s about being honest with yourself”

So, we asked Billyo, are there budding artists who really believe they’re going to make enough with their art to buy villas in Italy? Billyo burst into laughter, but quickly turned serious to talk about an issue he cares deeply about—a dark side of the plentitude of information available today.

“There so many artists out there today who make their living just emulating other artists, and to me that is a real bone of contention,” he said. “I believe the ethics in the art market have deteriorated. It’s not just with dead artists. There are people copying artists who are alive, who have spent their lives creating and developing their look. You’re getting people saying, ‘That’s person doing pretty well, why don’t I paint like that person, and sell it for less.’ That’s a real sad state of affairs, and it endangers the whole culture.

“You’ve really got to do this for you—you can’t do it for the market,” he said. “It’s not about the money. It’s about living a good life and being honest with who you are. Then I think good things come out of it—though maybe I’m a nut!”
Today the good things in Billyo's life include canoeing and camping out down the Missouri River, painting what he experiences. He likes to dream about starting a project to revitalize Missouri's river culture by creating cultural events in the Mississippi and Missouri River towns. He is working on plans to get the Painting Missouri exhibit to Joplin and perhaps bring it back to St. Louis and Kansas City.

Billyo is on the board of the Foundry Art Centre in St. Charles, where he teaches classes and workshops, and the honorary board of the St. Louis Art Guild. He is also involved with the St. Louis Mercantile Library.

Billyo enjoys painting in California, where last year he won Best of Show in the prestigious 14th Annual Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational. He will spend April in the state teaching and painting the local landscapes. "I've been selling everything I've painted in California—I've got nothing left."

In fact, he said, "California is kind of alluring. It would be real easy for me to move there or to the East Coast. Friends of mine who live in those areas get a lot more for their paintings than I do here," he said.

"But Missouri is my home. As an artist, it's best to be inspired by where you're at and where you're from. When you do that, it gives people more of a sense of place, more value and appreciation of their home. I've tried to find that muse in Missouri."

More about Billyo O'Donnell
- [billyoart.com](http://billyoart.com) – Billyo's website includes his biography with his full roster of awards, his upcoming workshops and classes, the galleries where his paintings are sold, and a portfolio of works.
- [paintingmissouri.com](http://paintingmissouri.com) – The website devoted to the Painting Missouri has media stories about the project as well as a page where readers can share their own tales of Missouri county life.
- [Fate and a State of en Plein Air](http://columbiatribune.com) – This 2009 article from the Columbia Tribune is especially rich in anecdotes about how Billyo and Karen Glines created Painting Missouri and the adventures they met along the way.
- [Living St. Louis: Billyo O'Donnell](http://stltoday.com) – St. Louis’ PBS TV station, the Nine Network, talks with Billyo at his home and while he paints in a snowy field, in a six-minute video profile aired in 2008 on its weekly series highlighting the diverse people, places, and cultures of the region.

Images are courtesy of Billyo O'Donnell and the Kansas City Public Library.

Master of Landscapes and Missouri Journeys was created in February 2013 for the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency and division of the Department of Economic Development. The Missouri Arts Council provides grants to nonprofit organizations that meet our strategic goals of increasing participation in the arts in Missouri, growing Missouri's economy using the arts, and strengthening Missouri education through the arts. For information, contact moarts@ded.mo.gov.

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