

[Loud To Soft, Fear To Focus](#)

McColl.org Blog Post: June 1, 2015

By Hanna Blackwell

Despite her easy manner and soft voice, twirled with the accent of a true Charlotte native, [Caroline Rust](#) is not one to shy away from challenges in her work.



“The thing that had started to scare me was that I might have lost my ability to paint,” Caroline says of beginning her residency at McColl Center.

“Even though it’s natural to me, it had become a scary thing because I hadn’t done it in almost two years. I actually remember having conversations with my husband, I had started to tell him, ‘I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to paint anymore because I’ve done these decorative things.’”

Painting was the practice that drew Caroline to themes of femininity and questions about the female identity, which now distinguish so much of her work. She began her graduate program as a landscape painter, but soon found herself adding female figures and focusing on the stories those figures called forth.

Then, just a few years before her current residency here, she stumbled across an exhibit on the history of the vanity. She was immediately entranced.

“One could sit at a dressing table and let their whole life go by, or reflect on the life one had,” she sighs with a dreamy smile. The project took her to a completely new artistic place. “I was allowing myself to be open to the fact that I could do some sculpture. I freed myself up at that time.”



Caroline sees a return to her painting roots as a way to free up the stories her vanities can tell.

“You’ve got the mirror and you’ve got the dressing table, but if you stripped it down, what would it be? What if the little mirror was all the way up here,” she says, stretching an arm diagonally away from an invisible tabletop, a playful glint entering her eye.

“Or a Joan of Arc one. What if the stand was a sword and a church window the shape for the mirror? But with canvases instead of mirrors.”



In the back corner of her studio are the beginnings of such a piece, a shelf with a single slender leg suspended inches above the ground. The canvas above it is a storm of color, still emerging into form.

“My landscapes [were] free, expressive, gestural, lots of color...and loud. They were very loud,” Caroline reminisces lightly. “I had narrowed my approach to be white, or soft or whatnot, and that maybe was lending itself more to women, but I’ve wanted to open it up, to be more expressionistic and gestural. So those are the things that I had feared doing and that’s what I’m doing.”

Asked about the loudness of her older work, Caroline takes a quick inventory of the pieces around her—the line of pastel pink shoes along one wall and the blush-colored vanity opposite the studio door.

She responds with an affectionate laugh.

“These pieces? I think they whisper.”