

Andrea Nutt

At the beginning of a promising career,
a young painter heads further south to capture the light of Puerto Rico

★ By Bronwen Dickey
Photographs by Peter Frank Edwards

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AT 6:45 A.M. IN OLD SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, when most of the city's residents are still tucked away in the air-conditioning, Andrea Nutt is already hard at work on a painting of Casa Blanca, the White House Museum. With her easel positioned in front of the immensity of tropical foliage that surrounds the museum — a house built on land purchased by Ponce de León — Nutt prepares her palette and adjusts one of several clips that keep her long mahogany hair out of her face. She prefers to paint





ABOVE: *Southern Barn in Summer*, oil on canvas OPPOSITE: The artist relaxing on the rooftop deck of the Gallery Inn in Old San Juan

in the early mornings, despite their oppressive mugginess. “The light is really clean, and I can give it my best of everything,” she says. “There’s no influence from the rest of the day.” The light this morning is anything but clean. In fact, a thick gray haze has settled over the city, slightly dulling its sherbet-colored building facades and muting the variegated blues of its brick-lined streets. “Still,” says Nutt cheerfully as she edges in the top of a door frame on her canvas, “there’s a lot I can do.”

Nutt, a devoted classical realist, came to Puerto Rico from Atlanta four months ago when her husband, Tony, whom she met doing Christian charity work in Nicaragua, let her pick where they would spend his first three years in the U.S. Coast Guard. After considering the Florida Keys and the Bahamas, Nutt chose Puerto Rico for its landscapes, sight unseen. Half-expecting the

levels of social and economic distress she had seen while traveling in Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, she was surprised by Puerto Rico’s pronounced economic stability and European flavor. “I romanticized an exotic and beautiful place,” she says, “and I was right.”

Few artists her age have acquired the accolades and patronage that allowed Nutt the flexibility for such a move. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from George Washington University at the age of nineteen, the recipient of a Presidential Art Scholarship, and at twenty-six she has already studied art full-time in Florence, Italy, and has shown work at galleries in Florence, London, Dublin, Nantucket, Atlanta, and Charleston, South Carolina. At the moment she has enough private commissions — many for religious or figurative pieces — to keep her busy for the next five years, she says.

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ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Study of John Singer Sargent's *Head of a Capri Girl* (1878), artist's collection; objects in the artist's studio
OPPOSITE: Colton, oil on canvas

"People are often shocked to learn how young she is, yet has achieved so much, has such ambition, and is spiritually centered," says Charleston gallery owner Ann Long. "It is admirable and impressive." Though always grateful for gallery showings, Nutt particularly enjoys working on commission. "Then the art is the primary thing," she says, "not the publicity or the approval. It's just the art."

At a time when paintings — and artists themselves — have become almost cartoonishly commoditized, and when big-city galleries often rely more on art consultants than on a well-trained eye to determine whose work they show, Nutt embodies something of a rebellion against the inflated commercial appeal of modernism. And, she is willing to share her knowledge of the classical tradition with such kindness and conviction that she gives you the kind of education you didn't know you were missing. One afternoon, when we are at one of Puerto Rico's unsurpassable beaches, perched high atop rocks overlooking the ocean, Nutt gives me an impromptu lesson in the artistic rigor of realism. She

believes that art is one of the few fields where technical mastery is at an all-time low. In contrast, realists are saying, "Wait a minute! Beauty is objective; beauty is real!" she says. "It may be difficult to describe, but that doesn't make it any less real."

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Originally from the Philadelphia area, Nutt searched for years for the right teachers before she could talk about artistic method with such certainty. After petitioning the state of Pennsylvania to leave high school because she felt unchallenged, she attended community college and George Washington University before she found the classical artistic education she craved. Nutt remembers working on a landscape painting when she was sixteen and taking it to her teacher, frustrated, saying, "I can't make the grass look like grass. I want this to be a place you could enter." This aspect



of realist painting—the “enterability” of it—held particular significance for Nutt, who, as a child, used to lose herself in the landscape paintings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “One was called *Solitude*,” she recalls. “It was a night scene, it looked like a wintry road, and I could *walk down that road*, and the fantasy at the end of the road for me was endless.”

At the Florence Academy of Art in Italy, under the tutelage of Ramiro Sanchez and Daniel Graves, Nutt finally found the caliber of teaching she had been looking for, but even then she had little understanding of how arduous realist painting was and how much pride she would have to swallow to learn it. The entire first year there her teachers didn’t let her touch a paintbrush, so she could perfect her drawing. “I wanted it to come easily,” she says, shaking her head. “Everything before that had come so easily and [painting] is so incredibly hard.”

Now, six years later, Nutt is nothing if not humble. She exudes both a wide-eyed, youthful naiveté and a precocious sagacity, at

times seeming both younger and older than her twenty-six years.

“There is something so rare about Andrea inside that her art projects it,” says Georgia gallery owner Patti Lammers, an avid collector of Nutt’s work, “and I think that’s something that [artists] had during the Renaissance.” Indeed, one of the most striking things about Nutt is how grateful she is when she comes across something she sees as beautiful — often exactly the kind of thing others might overlook — and how pronounced her aesthetic relationship to the world is. Over a glass of wine one evening on a rooftop deck in San Juan, Nutt uses the overcast horizon as a means to explain value (relative lightness to darkness in a painting) and gushes over its colors. “I love the gray days here,” she says, smiling. “People think the Caribbean is all sparkling blue, but I love it when the sky and the sea almost unify. Those days are so paintable.” When an afternoon painting session in El Yunque rain forest is cut short by a massive downpour, Nutt patiently opens an umbrella to protect her painting and muses about the



CLOCKWISE (FROM ABOVE): Self-portrait drawing, charcoal/chalk on paper, private collection; the artist at work,

painting Casa Blanca, the White House Museum; well-worn brushes in the artist's studio



impeccable shadow shapes that only the rain forest can provide. Waiting out the circumstances in the thunderous rain, of course, is part of a classical realist's work. As Nutt is quick to remind you, "it's a slow art."

Though she used to paint mostly still lifes and figurative pieces, Nutt's attention here has turned primarily to landscapes. "The landscapes [in Puerto Rico] beg to be painted, and they're so beautiful that if you make them even a *little* bit as beautiful as they

are, you'd have some success," she says. "In Old San Juan alone I could be entertained for three years, so I don't know how I'll ever get to it all." She pauses. "The burden of Puerto Rico is that beauty is passing you by all the time, and you can't just grab it like a photographer can."

