

# LETTING GO



PATRICIA SKINNER

BY PAMELA OLDHAM

*"In my world, nothing is black or white. Truth, for me, lies somewhere in between, where things are often left unresolved, unanswerable. My paintings come from that place in between, where impression is more important than definition, where in the giving up, something is found."*

—Patricia Skinner.

Upon meeting pastel artist Patricia Skinner, it's apparent that her emotionally evocative artist's statement above could easily stand as her personal as well as professional credo. She is absolutely right when she says nothing is black or white in her world. Her work and her life defy conventional definition and stereotypes.

Patricia and her artist husband of 10 years, realist painter Bradley Stevens, along with their dog and two kittens, live in Gainesville, a place synonymous with noisy bulldozers and explosive residential development. But the vision and sounds that description might conjure directly conflict with Patricia's day-to-day reality. The couple's cozy home is located off a winding country lane that gently meanders through a quiet, heavily wooded rural enclave, affording

the two artists an environment that inspires and uplifts the creative soul.

Given all the hubbub going on just minutes away, the serenity that envelops Patricia's home is unexpected. Inside, there's a feeling of peaceful excitement that

isn't easily described, except to paraphrase the artist's refrain—it's not black and white, but something more satisfyingly in between, far more intriguing than gray. The same could be said of Patricia and her work.

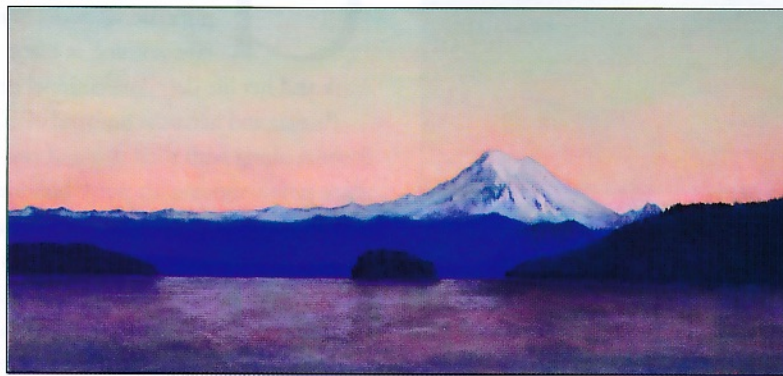
A former dancer and linguist, she embodies many of the features we commonly associate with the most creative beings among us—grace, poise and elegance; welcoming while a little bit reserved. Yet as we stood in her foyer one afternoon, engaged in a serious pre-interview discussion about Gainesville's development, our chat was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a tiny fabric ball bounding down the stairway from the second floor. The ball ricocheted off

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*Art is a journey, something that's always with you. At different times of life, creative needs change. You find another form of expression.*  
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FACING PAGE: "BLUE ARCHIPELAGO," PASTEL ON PAPER, 21" X 15"



a lower step, hit the wooden foyer floor and bounced high between us. All at once, the exquisitely composed artist doubled over in gleeful laughter. Then she looked up toward the gallery on next floor. There, Mimi, a tiger-striped kitten, peered down at her human. “Oh, you want to play, don’t you?” Patricia teased.



Undoubtedly, Mimi’s bid for attention would have won out had a guest not been present. Patricia obviously loves spontaneity and possesses a genuine passion for life. Clearly, this is an artist who leads with her heart.

Although she previously dabbled in oils, Patricia now works exclusively in pastels. “I think it’s the purest art form because it uses pure pigment. And for me, it all starts with color,” she explains. Patricia describes her artistic style as “somewhere between realism and impressionism.” The images she creates have a dreamy quality, an aspect that arises from a goal of capturing the emotions she feels when in the presence of her subject.

“I don’t want to be a photographer,” she says. “I’m trying to paint more from memory and emotion. That’s what I want to share.”

Unlike the drawings many of us automatically envision when we think of pastel art, Patricia’s works are true paintings. She liquefies the normally solid pastels using alcohol, and then applies the melted color to the entire surface, usually layer upon layer. The result is decidedly—unexpectedly, perhaps—painterly. But the effect is soft, vivid and textured. The paintings are also durable and long-lasting.

Contrary to popular belief, pastels maintain their just-painted look indefinitely. “I don’t know where people got the idea that a pastel painting doesn’t last. All you need to do is look at Degas’ work,” Patricia says. Indeed, Edgar Degas was a prolific user of pastel

and was the medium’s champion. According to the Pastel Society of America, Sotheby Parke Bernet sold at auction two Degas pastels for more than \$3 million each in the spring of 1983. Both were painted about 1880.

For Patricia, the process of creating a painting is almost as exciting as the final outcome. Viewers who study her works often recognize the clues she’s intentionally left behind to share the process with others. It’s all part of the experience.

Gaze at a Skinner original and you might be surprised by what you didn’t notice at first glance. A painting might appear to be predominantly single-hued. But look more closely and you’ll likely see that it’s made up of a complex palette consisting of many richly colored washes and accents. You might also be surprised to see brush strokes in some of the works, leaving you to wonder if a medium other than pastel was used to create that particular painting. “No, it’s pastel,” Patricia will respond with a quick smile. The brush strokes are the visual remnants of a gesso-and-pastel mixture Patricia sometimes applies as an undercoat to her paintings, a technique that improves the surface’s ability to grab hold of the multi-layered pastels and adds dimension and heightened interest to the finished work.

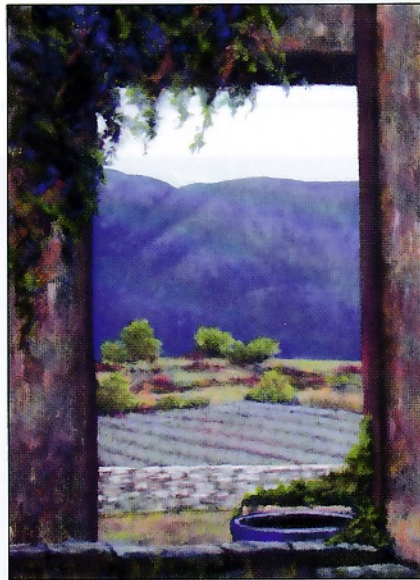


At the outer fringes of a painting she's completed, you might see a few unfinished edges emerge from an otherwise orderly scene, clues that delightfully reveal the vibrancy and watercolor-like quality of one or more of the layers of Patricia's liquefied pastels. Want to know what kind of surface she used? She might leave a marker behind so you can figure that out, right down to her favorite brand.

But despite the precautions she takes to ensure each work's success, Patricia's somewhat unconventional approach and techniques also add an element of chance. In a short biography, she describes the risk and why she eagerly accepts it: "Painting with pastels is a leap of faith. No matter how I envision the outcome, when the dry pastel melts into paint, the painting tells me what it will become. I have little choice but to let go of my preconceptions and listen."

A native of Seattle, Patricia has always been surrounded by glorious vistas. She made her way to the Washington, D.C., area as a college student. She graduated *cum laude* from Georgetown University, where she majored in linguistics, a subject she reveres as an art form in its own right. After college, she worked as a translator and interpreter in France and, later, at embassies here. All the while, she painted for her own sake. "Art is a journey, something that's always with you," Patricia says. "At different times of life, creative needs change. You find another form of expression."

She's painted professionally now for 15 years and has studied with Dodie Petro of Waterford and at The Art League School in Alexandria. She credits Petro with helping her find her authentic



"artist's voice." Still, despite the deep roots she's set down in Virginia, a part of Patricia belongs to the Northwest. She and her husband maintain a second studio in Seattle, where Patricia's family still resides. Patricia and Bradley seem to have a sense of wanderlust. Throughout the year, the couple travels extensively, often painting on location. European destinations such as Paris and the French countryside and the American Northwest's Puget Sound and San Juan Islands are favorite spots.

Although Patricia's portfolio includes figurative work, she especially enjoys painting landscapes. Her description of the way in which she approaches landscape work likely applies to other painting subjects, maybe even her entire body of work.

"I paint the landscape not to 'get it right,' but to express how it makes me feel. When successful, my work is a diary of my feelings in a special place and time. Through painting, this place becomes for me as much a sanctuary of emotion as of beauty," she says. Undoubtedly, collectors of her artworks relish the experiences Patricia so generously shares with all of us.

Patricia Skinner is represented by Berkley Gallery in Warrenton and Weatherford Gallery in Seattle. She is a juried member of the Northwest Pastel Society. To inquire about her work, contact her at [stvnart@crosslink.net](mailto:stvnart@crosslink.net) or 703-754-7556.



FACING PAGE, TOP: "RECTORTOWN ROAD," PASTEL ON SANDPAPER, 12" X 24", AND "AFTERGLOW," PASTEL ON PAPER, 10" X 20"; THIS PAGE, TOP: "SKAGIT VALLEY," PASTEL ON PAPER, 15.5" X 16", AND "VIEW TO THE VAUCLUSE," PASTEL ON BOARD, 22" X 18"