

PASTEL panache

With an international society and a new show of their work, pastel painters make a splash

By Debbie Forman

Five women are sitting around a table drinking coffee and wine and sharing their passion for art. It's a camaraderie often seen among artists who share a commitment. For these women, it is pastel painting. They are among the 250 members of the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod (PPSCC), which is not simply a local organization. The group has members from 30 states as well as from other countries.

The artists around the table are Joyce Groemmer of Marstons Mills; Dale Michaels Wade of Eastham; Rosalie Nadeau of Orleans; Sherry



"Translucent Wave" by Joyce Groemmer



Joyce Groemmer of Marstons Mills

Jim Preston/Cape Cod Media Group



"Point of View," above, and "Before and After" by Dale Michaels Wade



Rhyno of South Dennis; and Deborah Quinn-Munson of Chester, Conn. They are discussing not only plans for the group's 17th annual national juried exhibition in June, but also their love of the medium.

Pastels have been used for hundreds of years, and a number of the French Impressionists worked with them. Edgar Degas

A range of subjects – still life, figures and landscape – appeals to Wade.

took the medium further by mixing pastels with gouache and watercolor and using steam to create a painterly quality.

Nevertheless, Nadeau says, "Pastels were often devalued because it was considered a sketching medium. It was considered transitory. It wasn't respected. It wasn't honored."



Dale Michaels Wade of Eastham

Jim Preston/Cape Cod Media Group



Rosalie Nadeau of Orleans

Jim Preston/Cape Cod Media Group

Nadeau, who teaches, finds pastels "user-friendly." You can work quickly, she adds. "They're Zen immediacy. They're in the moment."

Artists working in the medium, Nadeau explains, go beyond the sketch or preliminary drawing. They are creating "fully developed compositions that are layered and embellished."

"A pastel painting," Rhyno says, "can be as fully developed as an oil painting. It can be a "whole visual concept" with "an emotional interpretation."



"Five to Go," above, and "Pears Surround" by Rosalie Nadeau

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“The word ‘pastel’ calls up pale Easter-egg colors,” Groemmer notes, referring to the use of the word to describe the light shade of a color. But, of course, pastels come in rich, deep colors that can enliven a work of art. A dry medium, they are made in stick form, consisting of pure powdered pigments held together with a binder. Unlike other painting mediums, which use a brush or palette knife, Rhyno says, “There is nothing between you and the pastel stick. I like to feel the stick.” She is referring to the direct connection the artist has with the pastel.

Pastel sets come in dozens of colors. “They’re just so beautiful,” Quinn-Munson says, referring to the variety and rich array of hues.

“And it’s a fabulous pure pigment,” Nadeau exclaims. Artists often have hundreds of pastels in their repertoire.

Nadeau, who teaches, finds pastels “user-friendly.” You can work quickly, she adds. “They’re Zen immediacy. They’re in the moment. You don’t have to wait for them to dry.”

“Part of the mission of the society,” says Rhyno, who is president of the group, “is to have pastels elevated [in status] and be comparable to other fine-art mediums.”

“The value of the national show is to educate the viewer that pastels are as important [as other mediums],” Wade emphasizes.

Ultimately, the group agrees that when viewers look at pastel works they are responding not specifically to the medium, but rather to the image itself, its subject, composition and color.

Quinn-Munson works in both oils and pastels. She uses a palette knife with her oil paintings to achieve the kind of texture you get with impasto, yet she finds “there’s more similarity than difference” between the mediums because the focus is always on shape, color, line and composition.

And, Nadeau adds: Even with pastels, “you can get the illusion of texture.”

Rhyno and Nadeau also work in oils and when asked which they prefer, they laugh. “OK,” Rhyno says, “I prefer working in pastels.”

Unlike other painting mediums, which use a brush or palette knife, Rhyno says, “There is nothing between you and the pastel stick.”



Sherry Rhyno of South Dennis

Jim Preston/Cape Cod Media Group



“Crashing,” above, and “Tied Up” by Sherry Rhyno



Quinn-Munson works in both oils and pastels. She finds “there’s more similarity than difference” between the mediums because the focus is always on shape, color, line and composition.



Deborah Quinn-Munson of Chester, Conn.

Russell Munson



“Breaking Point,” above, and “Untucked” by Deborah Quinn-Munson



Nadeau is somewhat evasive, returning the question with a challenge: “So which is your favorite kid?”

Of the 250 members of PPSCC, the majority are women. “It’s a delicate medium,” Nadeau says. Of the 10-member board of the organization, only two are men.

When the discussion turns to subject matter, the artists have their favorite. Nadeau finds pastels work well with flowers. Rhyno “loves” still life.

“I need some kind of emotional response [to a subject],” Groemmer says, “and still life doesn’t do that for me.” She likes working plein air.

A range of subjects — still life, figures and landscape — appeals to Wade. Although not often, some artists find the medium lends itself to abstraction.

Techniques for applying pastels vary. The sticks are made in different consistencies. They come hard and soft. You can float the color on the paper with the pastel stick and you can smear the surface.

WHAT: “For Pastels Only on Cape Cod”

WHEN: June 18-July 14

WHERE: Cultural Center of Cape Cod, 307 Old Main St., South Yarmouth

Quinn-Munson sometimes does an oil wash before she applies pastels.

Groemmer uses alcohol. “I lay out the shapes and values with pastels; then I rub the pastels into the paper.” Using a brush, she paints over the image with alcohol she buys at a pharmacy. It dries quickly. “The alcohol fixes the image, which then becomes a roadmap to your composition and values.” Pastels are then applied. The layering begins and texture evolves.

Nadeau tones a heavy, sanded paper with a watered-down, warm-color acrylic paint because she doesn’t like working on the bright white of the paper. “I want the colors of the pastels to be the brightest,” she says, not the paper.

Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod was founded in 1995 to organize exhibitions for pastel artists and to educate the public. The nonprofit group also offers workshops.

In addition to the June show, the group is organizing one off Cape. “Painting New England in Pastel” will run at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, from Sept. 22 through Jan. 19, 2014.

Submissions to the juried show in June could number as many as 300, which was the count last year. Of those, 79 were selected. Liz Haywood-Sullivan, a well-known pastel artist who exhibits nationally and lives in Marshfield Hills, is this year’s juror.

Quinn-Munson is planning to submit a river view to this year’s show. Nadeau is thinking about a pastel of oysters. Wade’s selection will be “three elderly women standing in the water.” Groemmer is thinking of “something to do with waves.”

Judging by their plans, it’s likely the exhibit will feature a brisk array of subjects and a variety of styles. ■

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