THE AGE OF INSIGHT

The 10 winners of our 18th Annual Over 60 Art Competition—who range in age from 62 to 85 years—have plenty to say about the pursuit of art and how to keep creativity flourishing at any age. ***By Doreen Manning***

Debbie Mueller

DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Tea With Sargent (oil on panel, 18x18)

My winning painting is part of a still-life series that incorporates my art books into the composition. With this piece, I had the chance to paint in a style completely different from my own. John Singer Sargent's *El Jaleo* took my breath away when I saw it at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in Boston, and I was eager to use this image in one of my paintings.



DEBBIEMUELLER ART.COM

SAGE ADVICE

For artists looking to get to that next level, my advice is both simple and difficult. Paint, paint, paint. Find a teacher. Not any teacher, *your* teacher; it took a while to find mine. Be fearless—it's just a painting. Being a physician helps me put a lot into perspective. This is not life and death. It's art. Explore, be brave, take chances and be joyful.



MY ART STORY

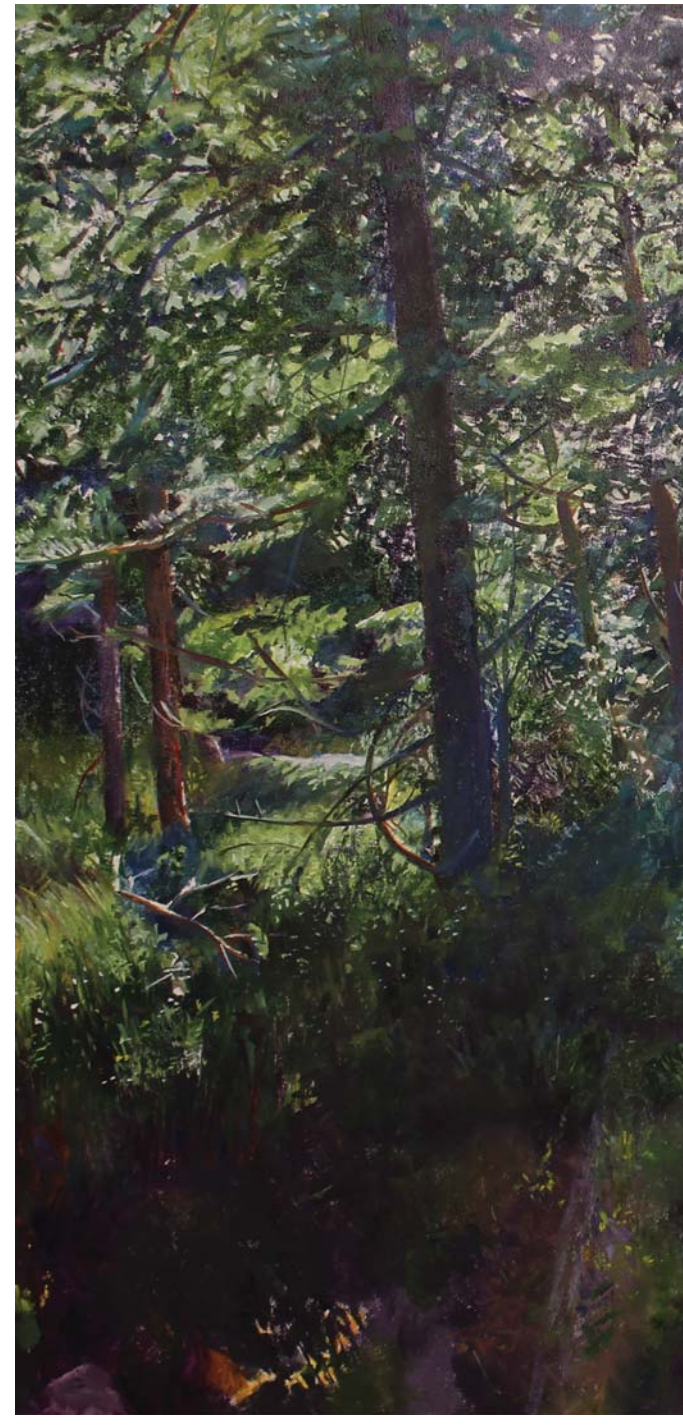
I started painting in 2016. I wasn't the kid who drew all the time. Up until that year, I'd had no art education or experience. Then, one rainy day, while visiting my parents, my mother—a lifelong hobby painter—asked me if I wanted to paint. An hour later, I'd created a terrible painting but I recognized the feeling of joy during its creation. I went home and bought my first set of paints. I started with acrylics and then moved to oils within the first year. I'm still a practicing physician, working three days a week. The rest of the time is for art.

"MY FAVORITE PART OF THE PROCESS IS REACHING THE POINT WHERE THE PAINTING STARTS TO MOVE BEYOND THE 'UGLY' STAGE. IT GIVES ME HOPE!"

Dan Knepper

JACKSON CENTER, OHIO

The Forest King (oil on canvas, 30x45)



The story of this painting begins in Colorado, when I was standing on a ranch as a parade of 200 elk passed by. We don't have elk in Ohio. When you first see them, you realize they're the size of horses! Their antlers alone are the size of the entire white-tail deer. It was a spiritual moment for me.

I wanted to create a painting that was more than just the typical "elk in a wild meadow" composition. This guy is regal. Royalty. The filtered light through the foliage took some thought. It was a combination of palette knife and using the side of the brush, as I also tried to use the light to move the eye through the background.



DANKNEPPERART.COM

MY ART STORY

I was an art teacher for 26 years, much of that time spent in grades 1 through 12. I reached a point when I realized that I wanted to be a full-time artist, and it wasn't going to happen while also trying to be a good teacher, so I resigned. When the administration built a new building for the school, they asked me to create an 8x32-foot mural in the new library. That art commission helped get my full-time career going. I've been lucky to have some wins in national competitions and get into some galleries. Lately, I've been focusing less on galleries, though, and more on major art auctions and shows.

SAGE ADVICE

Everyone has an opinion. *Everyone*. Paint how and what *you* want to. If you do it well, and market well, people will notice.



"I LOVE THE ACT OF PAINTING. IT ALLOWS ME TO REVISIT THESE PLACES, FEELING LIKE I'M THERE AGAIN. I CAN STILL SMELL THE AIR IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK."

Dana Wiggins Thompson

MILLEDGEVILLE, GEORGIA

Amazing Grace

(watercolor on 140-lb. Fabriano Artistico cold-pressed paper, 22x30)

Amazing Grace captures a moment of profound faith, stillness and grace, inspired by an experience I had photographing a wedding in a small church in Tennille, Ga., 10 years ago. The inspiration began with a quiet, poignant moment during the wedding shoot, when the grandmother of the bride sat peacefully, watching the bridal party being photographed. The afternoon sunlight streamed through stained glass windows, bathing her in a soft, radiant glow. The serenity of the scene stayed with me.

In the painting, I paid extra attention to the textures of the stained glass and wood, as they enhance the timeless atmosphere. The addition of the red turban and blouse was intentional to heighten the warmth and emotional resonance. Overall, this painting feels like a reflection of my artistic growth and the ongoing connection between my creativity and personal transformation.



@DANA.WIGGINS1

MY ART STORY

My journey began in the early '90s at The Dubai International Art Centre, where I took my first watercolor class. Living in Dubai for 23 years exposed me to diverse influences that helped shape my early practice, blending storytelling and watercolor in ways that continue to guide my work. Teaching local watercolor classes and participating in workshops has helped me refine my techniques and expand my understanding of composition and lighting. I'm now in my 60s, and I've gained a deeper sense of purpose and reflection. I'm more intentional about what I paint and how I approach it. I've felt encouraged to enjoy the process more, focusing on the journey of creation rather than just the outcome. This stage has also inspired me to take more risks—like entering juried art competitions and exploring new opportunities.



SAGE ADVICE

Embrace experimentation and take risks. Don't be afraid to try new techniques or explore different subjects. Stepping outside your comfort zone can lead to breakthroughs that transform your work. Also, be patient with the process; take time to truly observe and reflect as you create. The most rewarding moments often come from persistence.



"STAY TRUE TO THE EMOTIONAL AND PERSONAL CONNECTION TO YOUR ART. AUTHENTICITY WILL ALWAYS RESONATE WITH OTHERS."



"ONE OF THE GOOD THINGS I'VE NOTICED ABOUT GETTING OLDER IS THAT I'M MORE PATIENT WITH THE PAINTING PROCESS, AND I'M LESS AFRAID OF MAKING MISTAKES. I KNOW IF I'M TRULY UNHAPPY WITH A PAINTING, I CAN ALWAYS SOAK IT IN THE BATHTUB, SCRUB OFF THE PAINT WITH A TOOTHBRUSH AND START AGAIN."



David Cox

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Trader Joe's Daisies (watercolor on paper, 13x16)

I was unfamiliar with the unusually bright color and boldness of the Gerbera daisies my wife brought home from a shopping trip and immediately decided to paint them. I photographed the flowers in sunlight against a dark background and composed a triangular arrangement with the three deep-orange blossoms as focal points, framing the soft-yellow buds and stems.

I enjoy painting flowers, both in outdoor settings and in more formal indoor still lifes, but this painting has become a favorite because it connotes such joy and happiness.



MY ART STORY

I studied architecture in college, followed by service in the Army and in Vietnam. Afterwards I became a professional architect and practiced for the next 45 years. Art has always been an inherent part of my education and experience, including drawing, painting and making multiple trips to European cities over the years. My travels produced small ink and watercolor sketches, and—after retirement—I referred to these sketchbooks to start painting again.

SAGE ADVICE

Simply spending time on one's artwork is critical to improvement. Setting aside time each day for creating art is always time well spent.

Janine Helton

SAINT CHARLES, MISSOURI

Under the Noonday Sun

(watercolor on Arches 300-lb. hot-pressed paper, 14x15)

This watercolor painting began with a series of photos I captured on a cool, sunny day while having lunch at a local café. I noticed this woman standing in full sun, near a busy street, going through her purse and checking her phone. Imagining the circumstances that brought her there, I decided to crop in close and focus on her expression as she squinted in the sun.

I found inspiration in the strong light, the shadow contrast and the intriguing subject. The resulting painting is a good representation of what I try to achieve through the use of color and variety in flesh tones, as well as in the play of light and shadow across a face.

SAGE ADVICE

I'm always telling my students to slow down, think more and work on several paintings at once to lower the pressure. Work around the page rather than working one area to death. I also think it's important to select a limited palette and get to know how colors play and mix together rather than selecting colors by tube.



JANHELTONARTWORKS.COM

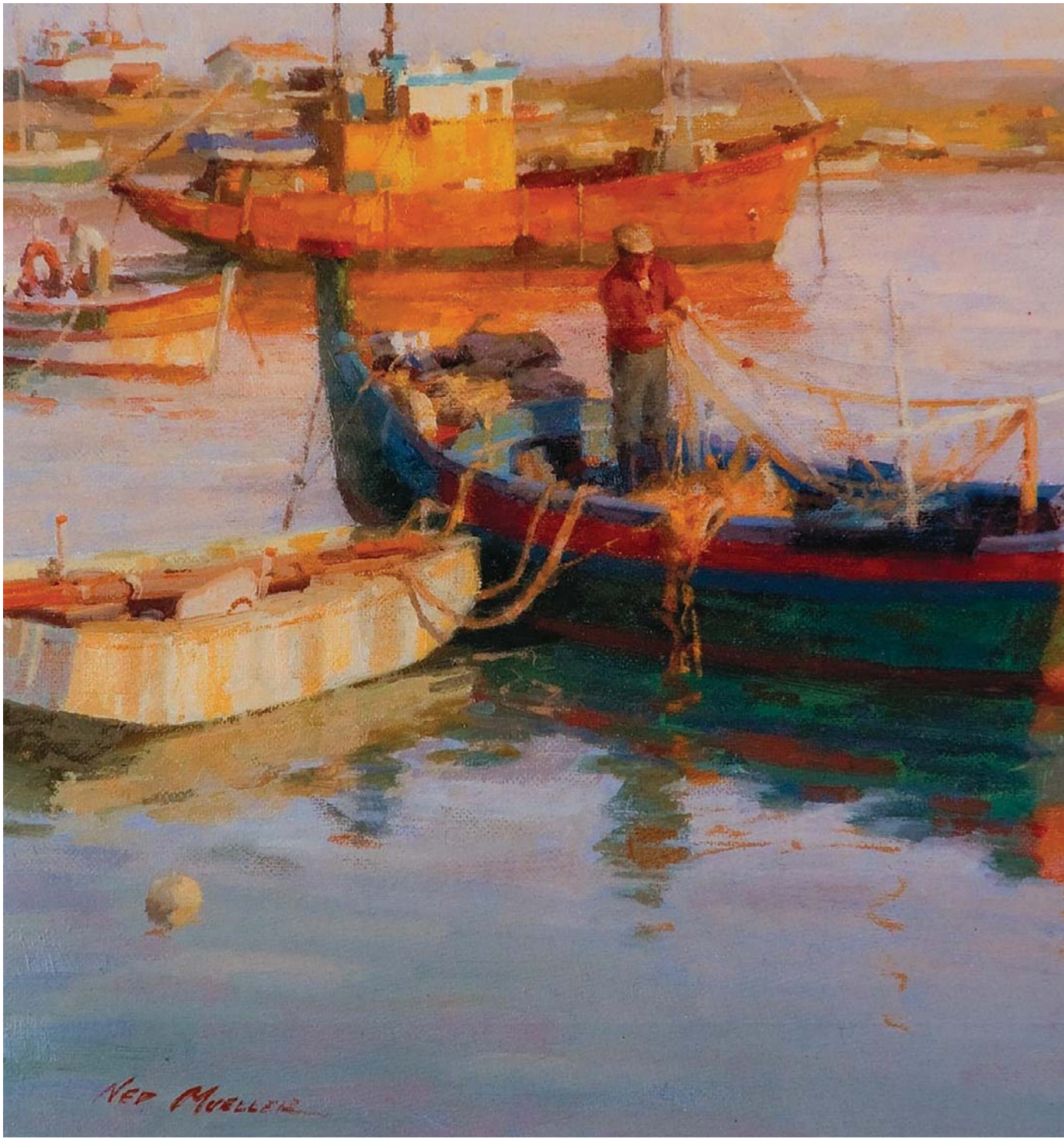
MY ART STORY

Though I dabbled with drawing and various arts and crafts throughout my life, I've had no formal art education. When I became an empty nester, in 2009, I started taking watercolor lessons from a local artist and then began attending the occasional workshop. Watercolor painting opened up a whole new world to me, and I got hooked. At first, I tried to capture the subject exactly as it appeared in the photograph; I knew nothing about design and composition. That began to change the more I immersed myself in everything watercolor. I subscribed to art magazines, read many books on art, painted constantly and even joined a couple of local art groups.



"I LOVE BEGINNING A NEW PAINTING. AFTER LOOKING THROUGH MY PHOTOS AND DECIDING ON A SUBJECT AND ITS COMPOSITION, I HAVE THIS FRESH DRAWING ON PAPER IN FRONT OF ME—FILLED WITH POSSIBILITIES!"





SAGE ADVICE

I tell students to draw as much as they can. Whether drawing a fish, a couch or a tree, you're sharpening your eye and your judgment—how wide something is in relation to its height and length, for instance. It's the same with color. Get some mileage in. There are no secrets; it's just putting in the time and effort to do what we really love.



"NOW, AT AGE 85, I PAINT MORE OF WHAT I WANT TO PAINT, AND HOW I WANT TO PAINT IT."

Ned Mueller

RENTON, WASHINGTON

Last Light, Lagos, Portugal (oil on linen, 11x14)

My typical process, which I used for this painting, is to do a few value studies to work out my design. I'll also do a color study for a more complex painting, such as this one. I generally work from large to small shapes, and from dark to light. I try to get as much harmony in all of the larger shapes from the light and shadow side. I like to get my canvas covered fairly quickly to see early on how all of the colors are working together. Then, I start making adjustments to everything—from the size of elements to the color temperature. The last step generally includes a few more details that may have to wait until some areas are dry.



NEDMUELLER.COM

MY ART STORY

I attended The Art Center School of Design, then in Hollywood, now in Pasadena. When the school started a weekly drawing session for gifted high school art students in the area, they asked me to be the teacher. I also stepped in when any life-drawing instructors needed a sub. I discovered that I loved sharing my skills and knowledge, so I've been teaching classes and workshops more than 60 years now. I'm pleased to have earned a Designated Master distinction with both the American Impressionist Society and the Oil Painters of America. My work has evolved, becoming looser over the years. My eye has continued to develop, too. I've learned to trust and go with my instincts.

Lydia Pottoff

LONGMONT, COLORADO

View Along the Dallas Divide (pastel on Pastelmat, 9x12)



View Along Dallas Divide was painted from a photo I took on a trip back to the Front Range, in Colorado, from Telluride. We were traveling back one morning as the sun was coming up, and the light was catching the peaks in the San Juan Mountains.

I've painted a lot of snow en plein air, so I understand how photos can change the color, light and shadow, and I compensated for it. I was captivated by myriad blues and lavenders in the snow, contrasted by the warmth of the colors in the willows. This piece was painted on a toned gray-blue paper that I thought would be perfect. The overall surface color unified the piece without needing an underpainting.



LYDIAPOTTOFFFINEART.COM

MY ART STORY

I went to school for fine art with a minor in graphics. After working for several companies as a designer, I started a creative agency with a colleague—my professional focus for nearly 30 years. Over the last few years, as I moved toward retirement, I renewed the interest in my fine art. My focus in school had been in drawing, so I was intrigued by pastels. In 2001, after recovering from a medical emergency in which I almost lost vision in one of my eyes, my husband surprised me with a gift of pastel lessons with a local artist. I was hooked!

SAGE ADVICE

There is no free lunch. Work hard and paint every day. Take lots of classes, keep learning. And try different things. Artistic ability is not given; it's earned.



“AS I’VE GOTTEN OLDER, I’VE BECOME MORE COMFORTABLE WITH MY LEVEL OF ABILITY. I REALLY BELIEVE THAT WE ARE ALL ON A PATH IN OUR CREATIVE PROCESS. WE ARE JUST AT DIFFERENT PLACES ON THAT PATH.”



Debra Joyce Dawson

PATASKALA, OHIO

Basil Was Her Soulmate (oil on stretched canvas, 20x16)

This still-life painting was created in natural light over the course of two days. I love painting from life, and although I've been predominantly a plein air landscape painter, I also work in the studio on occasion, from photographic reference, for large complex works. This piece was the best of both worlds—a larger canvas painted indoors, from life, in natural light.

The inspiration grew out of the need to make a painting for a 30-day art challenge. I decided to paint a bunch of lamb's-ear and basil that had been drying in the garage. The plants made a large fan shape when tied together with a green satin ribbon. I hung the bouquet against my salmon-colored kitchen wall, and I waited for the late-afternoon sun to come through the window. A raging excitement took hold of me when the light struck my subject, creating a beautiful long shadow!

"MY FAVORITE PART OF THE ARTISTIC PROCESS IS FINDING A SUBJECT I'M EXCITED ABOUT, EYEING IT UP AND PAINTING IT IN MY MIND AS I SET UP MY EQUIPMENT—BEFORE EVER GETTING TO WORK. IT'S WHEN I CAN SEE MY SUBJECT CLEARLY THAT THE PAINTING ALMOST PAINTS ITSELF."



DEBRAJOYCEDAWSON.COM

MY ART STORY

When I was growing up in Maryland, my father worked nights. Some evenings, my mother would bring out her colored pencils and draw, and my sister and I would draw, too. One year, I got a painting set for Christmas and made my first oil painting at age 11. Although I went on to study music in school, I was always drawing and painting, and—in my late 20s—I enrolled in art classes at my local community college. When my husband and I moved to Ohio, I enrolled at the Columbus College of Art and Design. My husband traveled a lot with his job, and I took my oil paints and drawing materials on the road. Drawing and painting the figure, clothed or nude, is a joy, but my involvement in the Paint Ohio Project led me to landscape painting. For me, landscape is the hardest thing to paint, but my move from Maryland to Ohio opened up entirely new scenery. It took me a few years, but I learned that a gray day can be a beautiful thing, and I've really enjoyed the opportunity to paint rural subjects. Now, after 30+ years in Ohio, the farms are rapidly disappearing, as are the old farmhouses and barns. I love those old shapes, and I try to capture them while I still can.

SAGE ADVICE

Carry a sketchbook at all times and *use* it. Make compositional thumbnails before painting. Paint shapes, not things.

Ann Alexander

MURRELS INLET, SOUTH CAROLINA

Hydrangeas (mixed media, 30x22)

In this mixed-media piece, I wanted to bring the natural beauty of the hydrangeas to life through rich layers of blues, gold and whites. I used an interplay of colors to create a sense of movement and energy, capturing the essence of the garden in full bloom. I love hydrangeas, and as I went through my process, it became apparent that this was what my subject was meant to be.

I'm pleased with how the piece turned out. I love the vibrancy of the colors, the effect of the gold leaf and the composition. It was a time when everything really came together, and I had an "I did it!" moment—a feeling that after all the continued hard work, my artwork is starting to show my new skills.

SAGE ADVICE

My advice to anyone, regardless of age, is to pursue your dreams! If you want to learn more about making art, find a local art group, take some classes and workshops, and sketch all the time. Carry a sketchbook and a pencil or pen with you always, wherever you go. Don't have time at the moment to make a sketch? Take a photo and sketch it later.



ANNALEXANDERARTIST.COM

MY ART STORY

My artistic journey began with formal studies at the Willoughby School of Fine Art, in Cleveland. After transitioning to Cincinnati in the mid-'70s, I continued my artistic education at the Cincinnati Art Academy, while in high school. When we moved to Southern California during my senior year, I decided to continue to pursue an art education at Citrus College, before transferring to San Diego State University, where I specialized in fine art with a focus in graphic design. I continued my training at Platt College, in San Diego, where I further honed my design skills. I began my career as a graphic designer, working first with a prominent publishing company and later as a freelance designer. My path took an unexpected turn when I was introduced to the world of merchandising. When I renewed my interest in my own fine art practice, I focused primarily on painting in oil, then transitioned into acrylic, and now I combine both with other media. Lately, I've really been focusing on creating a sense of depth in my work.

"DESPITE THE DEMANDS OF MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE, MY LOVE FOR PAINTING ENDURED, EVEN THOUGH IT HAD TO MOMENTARILY TAKE A BACK SEAT. NOW, I FIND MYSELF REDISCOVERING THE JOY AND FULFILLMENT THAT COMES WITH CREATING ART."





"I POURED MY HEART INTO THIS WORK, WANTING TO CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL OUT OF HARD TIMES."



Ann Kraft Walker

BLANCO, TEXAS

Hope in Seasons of Drought
(oil on linen panel, 24x30)

The story behind this painting is one of found beauty and hope in the midst of struggle. Central Texas has been experiencing excessive drought for years. The summer of 2023 was one of horrendous, record-breaking heat. All of nature was struggling to live. One morning, while walking by the dry riverbed, I noticed a gracefully shaped sycamore limb, with leaves brown from drought. In spite of what the drought and heat had stolen from nature, it was still beautiful. I also found a deserted bird's nest. Those two discoveries lifted my heart and gave me hope; there was still beauty to be found.

I spent a day deciding what to incorporate in the composition. I set it up by a north window. After making a drawing, I transferred it to the panel. First, I did a quick block-in, then a first and second pass, and ended with some tweaks and glazes. Except for the bird, it was completed fully from life.



ANNKRAFTWALKER.COM

MY ART STORY

I had a late start with painting. Not until I became an empty nester did I begin the process of learning to paint. I attended workshops, visited museums and read a lot of art books to soak up all I could. It's a long process to find one's voice. When I started, I tried to paint like the artists I admired—which, of course, I couldn't. I had a breakthrough, in 2012, when I decided to put away the open books and pictures I was striving to emulate and just paint.

SAGE ADVICE

Striving to turn down the noise of the world as much as possible helps to calm distractions. The real joy is in the act of creating, including the struggles, frustrations and elations—the push to pour out from your heart. Monet said, "I want to paint the way a bird sings." Birds sing without caring who hears or what they think. It's a beautiful, profound truth.