



Sunset, Wickford Point, 8"x10"

# STEPHANIE MARZELLA

*Love of nature expressed through interpretive color*

BY ELIZABETH WILSON

STEPHANIE MARZELLA graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. She is a member of the Pastel Society of America and the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod. She has participated in numerous solo and group shows around the country and has won awards for her work. She is represented by the Ferry Road Gallery in Saunderstown, Rhode Island.

The major driving forces behind Stephanie Marzella's work are her love of nature and her sophisticated use of color.

The beginnings of her color appreciation can be traced to an intensive five-year art program at the Cleveland Institute of Art. She credits the program at the Institute for teaching her art basics and introducing her to many

phases of art. Painting in all mediums, color theory, glassblowing, drawing, art history and textile design were all part of her curriculum. "If you understand color, drawing and design, you have an excellent foundation," she says.

She honed her color skills while working as a colorist and designer. Her job included a great deal of color mixing.

"It was an excellent foundation in



Nightfall, 7"x5"



Last Light, 7"x5"

design and color," she says. "It was important to get colors to balance. I had to think about color a lot, and work with different combinations or mixes until I got it right." She worked in gouache on watercolor paper. Many of the still lifes that hang on the walls of her home today are large, colorful paintings done in gouache.

Stephanie started working in pastels after she and her husband, Joe, a toy designer, moved to Chicago and started a family. She free-lanced for wallpaper companies and started to paint.

"My husband had a box of NuPastels. I started drawing everything in the apartment. We were definitely the classic starving artists back then.

"I focused on still life for a long time. After we moved to Rhode Island in 1988, I shifted to landscapes," she says. "It's so beautiful here. I live on a

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tidal cove off of Narragansett Bay called Mill Creek Cove. I watch the tidal changes every day. The view is forever changing. The sun sets over the bay and the moon sets there. We get great dramatic skies."

Working in that beautiful area, Stephanie was able to utilize her art

background to express her love of nature. "I have a very strong spiritual connection with nature," she says. "I am emotionally connected to it. It's so powerful and awe-inspiring, it can take your breath away. It's constantly changing. It always puts things in perspective for me. I am constantly amazed by nature's strength and beauty. I like to walk, hike, kayak, and scuba dive. I take a lot of photographs while I'm out enjoying nature." To enhance her spiritual link with nature, Stephanie practices yoga regularly and often goes on meditation retreats.

Her first paintings in Rhode Island captured white, puffy clouds, blue skies, the clarity of the landscape and the greens, golds and oranges of the marsh grasses. More recently, inspired by the magnitude of the sunsets, she has been working on a series called *Last Light*

Right,  
Fishing Cove,  
Afternoon,  
12"x9";  
below,  
Autumn,  
Fishing Cove,  
18"x24"



which focuses on the last light of the day. These paintings are moody and dramatic.

"I'm taking artistic license with color in this series, as well as in my other work. I look on these pieces as interpretive landscapes. I got the idea by watching some of the amazing sunsets in back of our house.

"The series has given me freedom because it is not literal and I can experiment with a new, more sophisticated palette," she says. "I'm enjoying the drama of the series. It transcends the more traditional landscapes that I've painted. It's fun. I love color, texture and creating moods. These pieces are lyrical and dynamic. Some of the pieces are very small and intimate, yet still very dynamic and graceful."

Pastels allow her to express the moodiness of her work. "I consider my work paintings rather than drawings. Pastel is a versatile medium—you can draw or paint or do both."

She strives to communicate feeling in her work. "I want the work to draw the viewer in from a distance. When the viewer gets up close I hope he or she will become absorbed in the colors, textures and the beauty of the medium and the ground it is on.

"These pieces satisfy me spiritually. They communicate what I feel from the constant drama, beauty and mystique of nature. I want the viewer to see through my eyes and feel my emotions. I want to enhance that view with texture and the medium."

Most of the *Last Light* pieces are done on Pastelbord, which is one of her favorite surfaces. She does a great deal of experimenting, however, and works on a variety of sanded surfaces.

When she works on paper, she tapes it to a piece of gatorboard which has been padded with a vinyl covering. "I like a bit of spring when I work on paper," she says. She uses many different types of paper as well, but says LaCarte as one of her favorites.

"I like to try every new product that comes out. It lets you take chances.

Sometimes I have painting sessions where I'm not trying to create a piece of art—I'm just experimenting and trying new products to see what they do."

Her choice of surface depends on the piece, she says. "I consider what kind of texture will enhance the mood. Pastelbord really lends itself to the moodier pieces."

Stephanie works flat rather than at an easel, and holds her board at a slight tilt. She doesn't mind the dust that collects on her apron, but vacuums often.

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*Stephanie is an advocate of fixative. "Sometimes I deliberately drip fixative on the painting to create flecks, which gives a certain atmospheric texture."*

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She always starts with a thin acrylic wash, usually with olives or burnt sienna. "I don't like to work on white. I use a thin wash to avoid filling in the tooth. I love Pastelbord, because if I don't like the way the painting is developing, I can take a rag and wash the pastel off and start over."

She doesn't do much drawing. "I do a minimal sketch, sometimes with white charcoal pencil. I paint more with pastels rather than draw. I love square pastels. I don't work with the points of pastels—I always use the sides." She works from her own photographs.

Stephanie always starts her pastel paintings with NuPastels and works up to softer brands. She uses Schmincke, Grumbacher and Sennelier, and recently purchased two sets of Great American Artworks pastels. She sometimes uses pastel pencils at the end of a piece to add crisper, more detailed edges, or details like parts of the sky showing through trees.

"I've worked in other mediums but



Left, Block Island Pathway, 10"x7"; below, Birch Trees, 5"x7"





*Dock Sunset, 9"x7"*

it's like coming home when I work in pastels," Stephanie says. "I love the immediacy of the colors. I have a lot of colors—but never seem to have quite enough, especially greens."

She is not afraid to experiment. She frequently rubs the pastel pigment in with her fingers, or uses a kneaded eraser or chamois cloth. If an area of the painting isn't working to suit her, she brushes off the pigment with a bristle brush or even washes off an entire piece with a rag. "I think it's good to take risks, to try stuff. If I don't

like what is happening, I wipe it off and go back to ground level."

Stephanie is an advocate of fixative, using it for effect in the painting process as well as a general coat to inhibit pastel dust. "Sometimes I deliberately drip fixative on the painting to create drops or flecks, which gives a certain atmospheric texture." She discovered the effect accidentally, while working on Pastelbord. "I was using the Sennelier LaTour fixative, which is a pump rather than a spray. On the Pastelbord, it did not absorb as it would

on paper, but left this little dot. I liked it, and began doing it deliberately. I also use Krylon workable fixative; with that, I have to spray slowly to make it drip. I also discovered that when you spray quite a lot of the workable fix, it gets kind of shiny, deadening and darkening the area. Sometimes I do that deliberately."

Experimenting has led to satisfactory results. "Each time I've had a major breakthrough in my art, I first had to hit rock bottom. You have to be willing to lose it," she advises. She points to an acrylic painting, which she thought was lost. She painted black over the whole thing and then rubbed off the black. The result was an interesting painting that found its way into a show.

Stephanie works in a well-equipped studio on the second floor of her home. She is surrounded by books, and her artwork hangs on the walls and over the open stairway. A large window overlooks the inlet, which frequently provides inspiration. Here she can watch the colors of the sky and the water and observe the changing tides. Her companion is Duke, a 100-pound Doberman. "He's not only my constant studio companion, he is absolutely instrumental in getting me out several times a day in every type of weather."

She tries to paint everyday. "My time is more limited in the summer when my children are home from school." She usually works from nine am to two pm each day. Now that her children are older—Alexandra is 12 and Trevor is 14—she has more time for her art.

"This is the first year I've devoted myself solely to art. It's been a growth year for me," Stephanie says. She has given up the hectic schedule of entering and showing at art festivals. "I used to do nine art festivals a year," she says. She worked for Cranston Printworks designing fabric for three years after moving east, but has given up free-lance fabric design as well.

When she isn't painting or drawing, she is busy at other art-related activities. She works at her computer creating pro-



Above, *Twilight Dock*, 13"x22"; below, Stephanie Marzella in her studio

motional materials or scanning in her finished paintings for record keeping.

She also uses the computer to evaluate a painting. "I sometimes scan a piece before it's finished, or when I want to try something with the color. I can try all sorts of color experiments on the computer without touching the actual piece. Often it gives me an idea for a new work. It's not limited to color. I try compositional and textural effects as well. I just experiment in Photoshop with all the tools and options available in that program."

Stephanie occasionally attends workshops, and recently attended a day-long plein air workshop working in oils. "Working plein air is a new experience, but I hope to do more of it. It made me realize how much a photo lacks." She wants to do more oil painting. "I want to experiment with creating oil paintings from my pastels and vice versa so they will be freer and more abstract, and removed from the photo reference."

She has a lot of art books and refers to them often. One of her favorites is

Bill Creevy's book on pastel painting. She is attracted to Wolf Kahn's color use and the way Wayne Theibaud applies paint. Other artists who inspire her are Klimt, Sorolla, Turner, Van Gogh and Monet.

"I look up artists on the Internet all



the time. I love seeing other artists' work. I'm always looking. Just recently I started looking at the work of contemporary artists in other countries. E-mail is a great tool—I've written to ask questions of artists and manufacturers, which I would never have been able to do with such ease before."

She continues to look for new ways to expand her art. "I'm starting an all-day life drawing class at the Newport Art Museum. I haven't drawn the figure in 20 years. I take workshops here and there and it's great to meet other artists and see how they work. It's rejuvenating."

She offers a piece of advice to emerging artists. "Take risks," she says. "Do things that scare you. If you have to wreck a piece to discover something, then wreck it. Some of my best pieces and best discoveries came from pieces I thought I had lost. But I took risks and they paid off."

■ Elizabeth Wilson is an artist and writer, and a frequent contributor to *The Pastel Journal*.