

Judge's Statement  
*Pastel Expressions* (2021)  
Northern Indiana Pastel Society  
MoonTree Studios Gallery

Knowing a Pastel Society exists in Northern Indiana cheers the heart. Pastel is one of the most long-lived and deeply beautiful of artist mediums. Its practice, over the past 500 years, has evolved slowly and patiently in the hands of innumerable individuals captivated by its seemingly fragile wonder. It is, after all, dust on paper. However, the paper is no ordinary surface; it is designed with just enough fibrous tooth to hold the dust in place. Given proper care and respect, a fine pastel will last for centuries and remain as bright and sure as the day it was made.

There are, to my knowledge, some 58 Pastel Societies in the United States and many more in the world. Seemingly accessible, the mastery of pastel is a journey that begins for many with the childhood joy of drawing with chalk on a sidewalk. Pastel, however, is a far cry more refined than simple chalk, though, in fact, it evolved from the 15<sup>th</sup> century practice of drawing with natural chalk. The creation of a pastel involves binding raw color pigment with a mixture of gum arabic and organic glue to form a lump or stick. Initially confined to the basic colors used in underpainting (black, red, and white), a range of pigments were being made by artists by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the practice of pastel painting has evolved to include many techniques and a color palette rivaling any other painting medium. I commend the Northern Indiana Pastel Society, the only such society in Indiana, for their committed practice and devotion to the quality of the pastel craft in the making of art.

There are many wonderful works to see in this exhibition, so much joy in the handling of pastel across a diverse range of subjects. Viewing any artwork occasions reference to past experiences, and I found myself thinking of the pastel work of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, both the Romantics and Impressionists who influenced many Americans studying in Europe, including the Indiana painters of Brown County. I also thought of J.M.W. Turner, who, though he was not known to have painted with pastel, would have seen his reflection in several of the show's atmospheric landscapes. Each pastel, in the exhibition, regardless of subject, opens a world of perception to the viewer which is rewarded by active reflection and the simple act of seeing.

Ranking art, however, is a flawed endeavor, as few objective criteria exist for judging art and even popular opinion changes over time. I once visited a collector whose living room had a doorway with a Bouguereau on the left and a Monet on the right. For him, it somehow summed up the vagaries of time because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bouguereau was the most famous artist in France while Monet, on the other hand, was seen as a dabbler and, by more than a few critics, a fraud. Today, we see the former as a skilled but unimaginative technician while the latter is the epitome of creative genius.

Art, in its purity, is the communication of an artist through an artwork addressing something seen, felt, imagined, or remembered. What makes an artwork distinctive and exemplary has much to do with the effectiveness of that communication, both in the quality of its technique and the depth of its personal perception. The best of art challenges how we see the world and allows the viewer a palpable connection with the artist's vision. Though all the works in this exhibition ring true with the definition above, there are four that stand apart in their use of the pastel medium to communicate a moment, an idea, or a passing wonder in the clearest of possible terms. The order below is simply a random choice. The first work that comes to mind is one recording the passage of time. It uses the pastel medium to bring the viewer into the closing moments of a cloud-filled day. The scene is common, a body of water, a wooded horizon. There might have been a storm, but its passing is unclear. What is certain is that the artist has chosen to talk about the moment when the moist air rising from the water dances across the deepening wood to mingle with the fractured angles of sunlight as they paint the cloud-filled sky. This is no mere snapshot, but rather, an elegiac lament for the ephemeral hues of an evening's peace, adorned like an elderly aunt adopting too gay a dress as she awaits the darkness to come. Rich in violet scents and lavender layers, simultaneously contrasting with yellow and egg-cream clouds, the work harmonizes in a bracketed spray of rust beating against the rhythm of the fading sun as it reaches toward a turquoise sky. *Solitude*, by Rosie Mireles, is an atmospheric wonder and fixes its purpose on delighting the soul.

Pastel requires both patience and protracted study to capture the spontaneity of a moment's passing, so it is good to see two works exemplifying these qualities in portraiture. *Through the Veils*, by Hilarie Couture, reveals the magical ability of seemingly random strokes to describe a person's features. Painting with an architect's passion for structure, Couture lays down line upon line, stroke upon stroke, color upon color to reference anatomy through personal vision. The woman depicted is no less alive were she present in the flesh. Veils of overlay dance across the surface and like a zephyr grabbing fallen leaves to reveal its twirling form, color is played into purpose giving the story of one person's face through the fiction of line. It is an altogether pleasant encounter.

Equally engaging but open to the subjective arousal of a summer night's pleasure is Barbara Gentner Stephenson's *Flame Thrower*. Who of us does not hold a childhood memory regarding the July 4<sup>th</sup> practice of waving a sparkler in the night? In this portrait of a young person, Gentner Stephenson neatly captures the brief and momentary exuberance of painting the darkness with the sparks and sputters of an uncontrollable burning. Such moments boarder on the surreal, illuminating our face, hair, and clothes through a flammable mixture held on a steel rod and imbedded with flecks of metal; aluminum and magnesium burn white, calcium gives orange, and lithium supplies a deep red. The beauty in the smile of the reveler tells a story held deep within all of us. It is built into our genetic code to control fire as our ancient ancestors had over 300,000 years ago. Gentner Stephenson's *Flame Thrower* is a timeless homage to the simple joys of childhood.

When blowing the dust from childhood memories, there are few as necessary to an understanding of how fast the American landscape has changed in the last 100 years than the sight of an old country barn. As a child, I can remember sneaking into the lone barn that remained on the shrunken piece of farmland which gave way to the subdivision where we lived. James Whitcomb Riley was never more alive for me than in those moments of exploration. One hundred years ago, 30% of America's population lived on a farm. Today farm and ranch families comprise about 2% of the population, though over 90% of all farmlands are still in the hands of family farmers. I thought of this as I studied the pastel painting *Still Standing* by Mona Witt. It was not just the superb handling of the media or the celebratory size of the work that captured my attention. It was, rather, the spirit of the place.

What were once as ubiquitous as the rain that watered their surrounding fields, old barns are, more than often, left to their own demise; the cost of taking them down or repairing them out strips the purchase of a new steel pole barn. They are America's answer to the abbey ruins of the English countryside, an ever-present reminder of a time that is no more. Witt's sense of composition is outstanding, and she realizes the power of red within the natural landscape. The artist leads us into the work in a weave of crossing boundaries, allowing our eye plenty of time to rest within the blue sky as it falls into a pale creamy pink light along the horizon. The barn, with its long low-pitched roof, feels like a watchful presence over the field of ripening grain. Across the foreground is an inviting mix of burnt sienna and green tall grass, though there is just the hint of a fence row to remind us that this is a path we should not tread without permission. The artist, thankfully, moves ahead and we are grateful for her vision and sense of the importance of place.

These four works epitomize the wonderful work being done by the members of the Northern Indiana Pastel Society in promoting the beauty of the pastel medium. They are among many fine and rewarding artworks at the Moon Tree gallery. Thank you for allowing me to comment on the exhibition. Your work is an important one for the communities in which you live. Please, keep painting.

Yours,

Bob Nowalk

Bob Nowalk is a master instructor in visual arts at Culver Academies and curator of the Culver art collection. He holds a master's degree from Michigan State, and a bachelor's degree from University of Dayton. He has been on the faculty at Culver since 1996, and before that, was an educator in Dayton for 21 years.