



Painting: Susan Klinger

# Susan Klinger

Susan Klinger is always observing, looking for a familiar scene that is overlooked - by John Cella

Susan Klinger is a master of chiaroscuro, the Italian word for light and shadow. Her creations are intimate landscape paintings which often focus in on a small aspect of a familiar scene, such as water splashing over rocks or reflections in a harbor. This technique was used most notably by Rembrandt and Caravaggio to create the illusion of a light from a specific source shining on figures and objects. "I still remember the moment I saw a painting by Jane Hofstetter that grabbed me from across the room. The heightened contrast in a painting can draw you in even before you are fully aware of what you are actually looking at. It's the paintings values that strike you first, the patterns of light and dark, not the details and colors. It can make a painting seem three dimensional," Susan explains.

I stand in Schang Hai Gallery in Creamery, close to Skippack, surrounded by her paintings of vivid contrast and color. A brief time later I've learned not only about chiaroscuro but about Notan, a Japanese design concept for creating composition in art. But why am I surprised? Susan was an art teacher at Perkiomen Valley High School in Collegetown for 34 years and served as the chairperson of the fine arts department for 14 years. She was also an instructor in

drawing and painting for both Montgomery County Community and Cabrini colleges. The gallery was hosting a show of her work called *Reflection*, in which all her paintings showed reflections in water or glass. "I didn't plan this", she laughs. "As I chose my art for this show I realized that I had painted reflective surfaces far more than I realized. I really like capturing the distortion and movement in water." While her subject matter is diverse and includes still lifes, florals, animals, and even abstracts, she is most drawn to realistic nature scenes and uses primarily soft pastels.

*Solomon's Island Sunrise*, which was featured in this show is stunning. An 18-inch by 13-inch image, boats are docked as the reflection of the sunrise's oranges and pinks and the green of the shoreline cast a beautiful color palette on the water. Susan points out the dark and contrasting bright patterns she utilized to create the painting's heightened effect. "You can see the pastel strokes here," she says. "I used a lot of dark blue and brown pastels here as well."

Susan, an attractive and personable woman, lives in East Norriton with her husband, Mike, a Systems Engineer and grew up in Colledgeville. "My dad was an engineer too, but artistic. He could draw anything. Back then men just didn't go to art school. I always liked to make things and do crafts. In 7th grade I was given an assignment to draw a still life and I still remember being amazed at how realistic and three dimensional it looked. From a young age I wanted to be an art teacher. But my dad wanted me to be an engineer because I was strong in math. You can see how that worked out", she laughs.

Jim McFarlane, a noted Montgomery County artist, was a major artistic influence on her art, first as her art teacher in high school and later as her teacher and mentor at Norristown Arts League. "My students at Perkiomen Valley High asked me to

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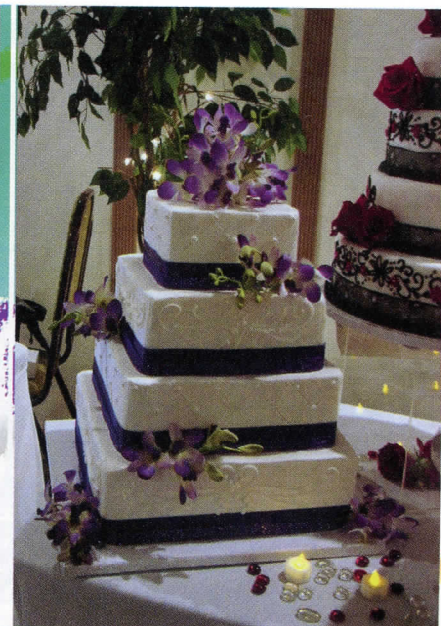
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teach them to paint in watercolors, which at that time was not really my specialty. So I contacted Jim for guidance and I stayed in his class for many years. He is a master of realism, very Wyeth-like. But eventually I had to break away from him and find out what worked for me as an artist."

A signature member of the Pastel Society of America, Susan now works primarily in soft pastels as they allow her to be more expressive and bold with color. "I took a plein air class and it was a very hot day. I just couldn't paint anything I was happy with. So I started to use pastels and something

Any pastel dust is collected on a pallet with drops of water and mixed with a palette knife to make her own pastels.

just clicked. I even sold a painting right away." Soft pastels have a binder that holds the pigment together in stick form. "There is no brush. I am actually applying pigment to the canvas with my hand. It is so very tactile."

*Cocoonut Palm II*, 24-inch by 15-inch, is so realistic and seemingly three-dimensional it seems one can reach out and pick one of the three coconuts. The colors are vibrant—the cool green and brown of the coconuts, the green palm fronds and the dark blue and burgundy trunk of the palm tree peeling away are made even more vivid by the pale blue and white of the sky. "I painted this from a photograph", she tells me. "I pre-painted the canvas with a dark watercolor in order to achieve the dark

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blue and burgundy pastel colors. I look at the photo I am working from, and plan the location of the major darks and lights in a piece."

As a student of the Japanese concept of Notan, she sees shapes of light and dark rather than following traditional compositional rules. "Stepping back and squinting at the painting helps to disregard details and see patterns of light and dark shapes. Opposite colors create 'visual vibration,'" she tells me. She points out to me the shadow that follows the curves of the coconuts and spirals inward to the deepest tones.

Any pastel dust is collected on a pallet with drops of water and mixed with a palette knife to make her own pastels. Little flecks of underlying color appear because of this approach and a viewer is not even aware of this.

An artist to the core, Susan is always observing, looking for a familiar scene that is overlooked. She admits that while she was sitting with me at Mal's Diner in Skippack, she was studying the gumball machine and the classic diner stools and thinking about using them in a painting. "You must see art live, to have a sense of the light, the colors playing off of each other. You just don't see the sparkle of the pastel in a magazine, the light hitting the particles at different angles!" she says emphatically.

Her work is always being exhibited in shows throughout the mid-Atlantic region, with regular displays at Farmhouse Restaurant as well as Off The Wall Gallery in Skippack. She also does commissioned works including portraits of beloved pets. She produces a newsletter which provides an insider look at art for the general public which can be accessed on her website, [www.susanklinger.com](http://www.susanklinger.com), where her paintings are available for purchase. But don't just look at her art on line. Take her advice and mine—see it live.

John Cella is a freelance writer from Montgomery County.

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