

THE Oil Spiel

October 2006

Welcome to the Oil Pastel Society!

Featured Artist of the Month

Marilynn Brandenburger

By Carol Zack



(This section borrowed from Marilyn's website)

Marilynn Brandenburger has been painting and exhibiting professionally for more than twenty-five years. Her awards and recognition include government and foundation grants, appointments as Artist-in Residence in national and state parks, and signature status in the Colored Pencil Society of America. Her work is in private and corporate collections throughout the U.S., including the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Gainesville College, Glacier National Park, the Hollywood Museum of Art, Isle Royale National Park, and Tyee Asset Strategies of Seattle. Her work has been featured in national newspaper and magazine articles and in two books, *The Best of Colored Pencil 5*, and *The Island Within Us*. Marilyn has also illustrated three books, including two in natural science, her primary interest.

Marilynn's images of nature come from 20 years of hiking, sketching and photographing in the national parks and other nature preserves all over the U.S. Currently her work takes two forms: medium- to large-scale landscape paintings and smaller, more intimate studies of nature's detail. She also paints still life, using objects from her personal collections or, most recently, objects in artists' studios.

Marilynn works primarily in watercolor, colored pencil and oil pastel, frequently combining the media to create works of richer colors and luminosity than can be achieved by one medium alone. Her work is noted for its bold contrasts of light and shadow, created by her sophisticated use of design and composition.

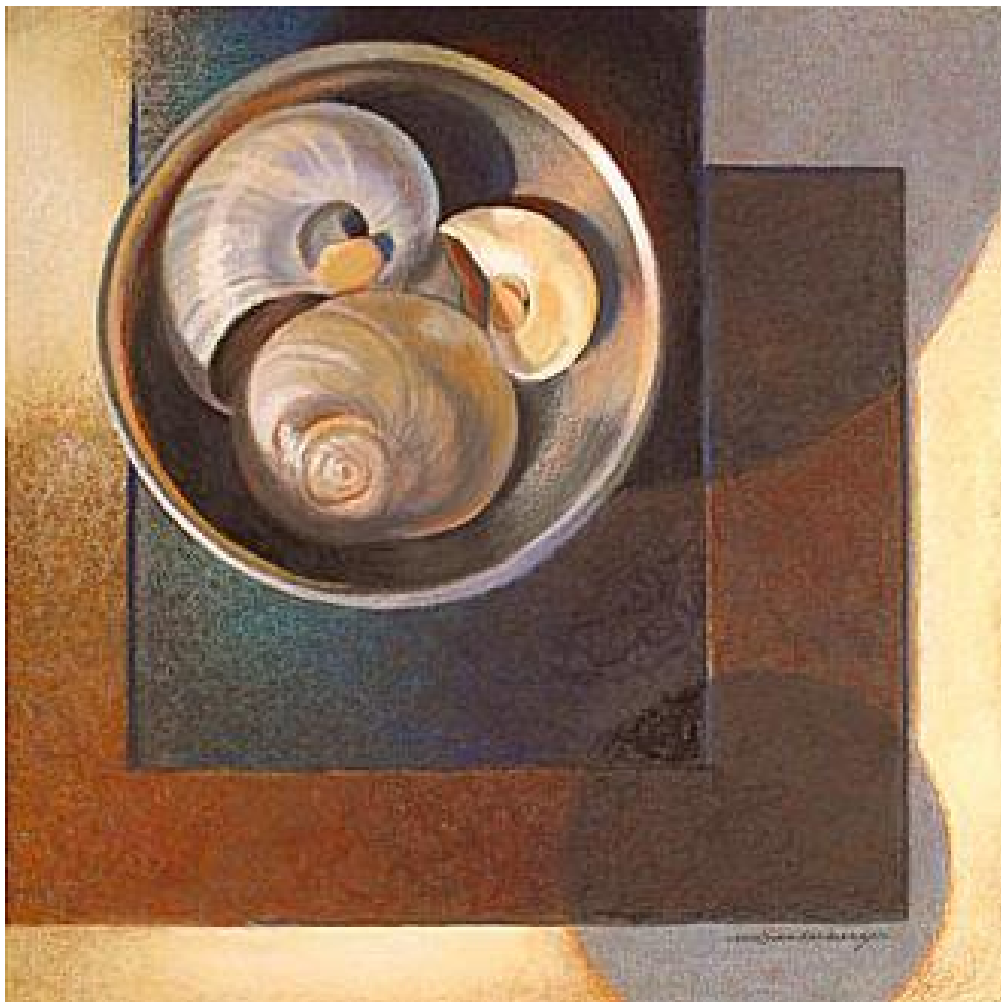
A native of the Midwest, Marilyn has lived in the south for more than thirty years. She holds a bachelors degree in anthropology from Tulane University and a master's degree in art education from Florida Atlantic University, and she is a graduate of Harvard's Institute for the Management of Lifelong Education.

In addition to painting, Marilyn also teaches art at community art centers in Atlanta and other locations in the Southeast, including the Spruill Center for the Arts in Atlanta and the John C. Campbell Folk School in North Carolina.

Marilynn's work can be seen by appointment at her studio in Decatur, Georgia, at the Georgia Artist's Registry in the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta, at David's Fine Art in Murphy, NC, and on her website www.brandenburgerstudios.com

Congratulations on your first place win in this year's OPS online member's show. Can you tell about the work you submitted called "Full Moon?"

"Full Moon" is one of the 18 paintings I created for the exhibit "Shells: Inside and Out," August 4 – October 1, 2006, at the Nature Art Gallery of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, in Raleigh. I placed Moon Snail shells in the silver bowl pictured, set the bowl on some pieces of colored mat board and then lit the still life with a natural-light bulb. The value changes and the extra circular shadow are elements added for the sake of design. This piece is one of my favorites because it presents a realistic center of interest in a strongly graphic, abstract design. Pushing the abstract "design" in a piece is one of my personal goals for my work.



Full Moon
© 2006 18"x18"
oil pastel/ gouache on
canvas panel"

Marilynn, I noticed that on many of the paintings you created, you choose to mix more than one media. You tell us in your bio that the pieces as a result, have richer colors and luminosity than can be achieved by one medium alone. How does that also impact the surface quality of your pieces?

What I mean by "mixed media" is that I lay down color in another medium and then work the oil pastel on top. What happens with this technique is that tiny bits of the under-color show through the oil pastel, adding a color sparkle that just seems more interesting than solid oil pastel. This under-color can be a loose, washy painting or a solid layer of color. For the washy paintings, I have used watercolor, gouache and acrylic, and, most recently, Holbein's acrylic gouache (yes, there is such a thing). I apply the latter over a pastel ground to give the acrylic some tooth. For the solid color I use Colourfix primer. This wonderful stuff comes in jars, in dozens of colors, is easy to apply with a brush, adheres to most dry surfaces and dries to a nice toothy finish that is just great for oil pastel.



Island Dreaming
© 2005 18 x 24
oil pastel/gouache on panel

I saw your painting called "Under the Bridge" on your website. I am intrigued by the very calculated design and monochromatic color. Can you tell us how this painting evolved? It looks like it could also have been done in colored pencil, but you tell us it really is an oil pastel. The surface rendering is really remarkable, as well as the feeling it evokes.

"Under the Bridge" depicts a scene at the Sandy Creek Nature Center, near Athens, Georgia, where the creek runs under a highway. The painting came about as a sort of experiment. I had been doing my oil pastels on paper, but had just started experimenting with panels. An artist friend suggested I try an oil-primed canvas mounted on panel. I didn't like it at first — the oil pastels slithered around on the canvas too much — but the experience kicked off a year of experimentation in which I tried just about every panel made to see which worked best with oil pastel. It's interesting that you think it looks like it was done in colored pencil, because if you saw it "in person" you might guess it is an oil painting. But that's one of the problems with online images; textures appear flat.



Under the Bridge
© 2004 18" x 14"
oil pastel on linen

Tell us about your teaching experiences. I say you teach classes in oil pastel. What would you advise students who want to take a class in oil pastel? Also, is there something particular you generally or always say to your oil pastel students that you would like to share with us?

I have been teaching art to adults at colleges and community art centers for more than 25 years. I offer five different classes, on a rotating basis: drawing, watercolor, nature journaling, landscape painting, and, now, oil pastel. At the end of this year I will retire from teaching 8-week, quarterly classes and concentrate on teaching workshops. In fact, I have two week-long oil pastel workshops scheduled for spring 2007. One will be held March 19 – 23 at the Spruill Center for the Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, and the other April 22 - 28 at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina. For those who live outside Atlanta, the Folk School -- which offers accommodations and meals in a lovely rural mountain setting -- is the more accessible. Class descriptions and supply lists for the two workshops can be found on my website at www.brandenburgerstudios.com, and students can register for the workshops at either www.spruillcenter.org or www.folkschool.org.

What I think is so wonderful about oil pastel is that beginning students can achieve great effects right from the start and feel successful, and advanced students can explore this medium's potential and enjoy its surprises until they're old and gray. (Well, that's me now, and I still have lots to learn!) There are three major concepts I emphasize in my oil pastel workshops:

- 1) You can create richer color by mingling many *different colors of the same value* into an area rather than applying just one color. This is something I learned from Susan Bennerstrom and this is how I created the rich browns in "Full Moon."
- 2) How oil pastel responds when you draw with it and what it ultimately looks like depends to a large extent on the surface you are working on. Oil pastel just looks different on paper than it does on canvas than it does on primed masonite, etc., so it behooves the oil pastel artist to try lots of different surfaces.
- 3) Students sometimes think a certain medium — like oil pastel -- is a "magic bullet," and when they find it, their paintings will automatically be successful. I emphasize that there's no substitute for a solid grounding in drawing, composition and color or for the hard work required to master the skills of painting.

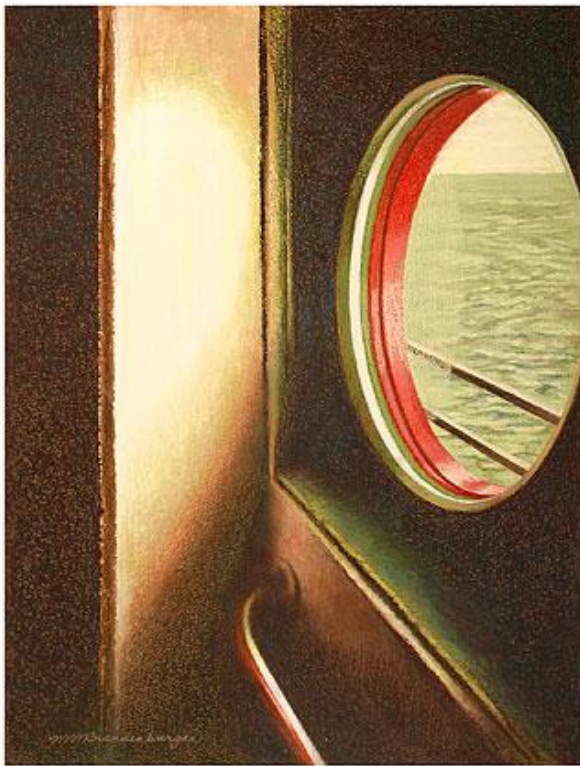


Three Part Harmony
© 2004 18 x 12.5
oil pastel on panel

Marilynn, do you find that your clients prefer one medium over another when you are exhibiting or selling your work?

No, clients are usually "sold" by the image, not the medium. However, galleries have told me it's easier for them to sell work that is not covered with glass or plexi, so that's why I'm working on panels and framing without glazing. I find that most clients have no idea what oil pastel is and are a bit hesitant about it until they see it. The surfaces I have been able to attain with oil pastel look so much like traditional oils that clients are easily won over.

Editor's note: For information on how Marilyn uses panels without glass, see her OP Primer article. <http://www.oilpastelsociety.com/OP%20Primer-Framing%20without%20Glass-Marilynn%20Brandenburger.pdf>



Red Porthole
© 2005 24 x 18
oil pastel/gouache on panel

Your understanding of nature and a strong desire to express it through your art must be very rewarding. Can you discuss how you translate what you feel and experience into a designed entity? In other words, what are your intentions for expressing your thoughts the way you do? How do you separate the way a scientist and an artist approaches their work?

I think I can best answer this question by describing how I work. First, in order to get in tune with nature I have to get away from my frenzied city life. I go off to a cabin in the woods or at the seashore and spend a week or two there in isolation. The ideal way this happens is when I get an artist's residency in a national or state park, but I also arrange these retreats myself and try to do this at least once a year. In these retreats I have a routine: I start my mornings off by writing in my journal about what I am seeing, experiencing and feeling; then I go off exploring with my

camera and sketchbook, taking photos and making drawings of what I consider compelling images; and I finish the day doing small watercolor or colored pencil studies. I don't do my big panel pieces until I get home, but when I do get back in the studio, I find the photos, sketches and journal writings enable me to relive my experience of a place and to bring that into my paintings. For example, I've been working on paintings of the Lake Superior region for 10 years now. I've returned repeatedly to the area and done plein-air studies there, but my three resources — journals, photos, sketches — are the key to my being able to paint this place year after year.

The way I design a painting is a structured process as well. I reread my journal, pull out my resource photos, select one or several images and develop a value study from them. The value study often undergoes many variations until I'm satisfied. Then I usually do a color study — not always, because sometimes I feel "sure" of a design and want to get right into putting color on a surface — but I find color studies help me focus on what I want to achieve in a painting: a sense of place, a palpable quality of light, an underlying abstract design and rich value contrasts.



Blue Bead Bonanza
© 2005 11x14
oil pastel/acrylic
on canvas panel

Marilynn, Tell how you have evolved as an artist and business woman.

I have been fortunate: I have a wonderful husband who supports my work and whose own day job has enabled me to work as a fulltime artist, but I find that my biggest challenge as a woman artist is still to "get the laundry done," so to speak, and have enough time to paint. It is a continual challenge, and the only solution I know is just to keep plugging away at one's art in between the life-stuff.



Red Stem Riot
© 2005 16 x 20
oil pastel/gouache
on panel

I see that you have a very extensive website that you share with your husband. Has this helped you build your business?

I have really benefited a lot from the internet and computer technology. Having a website forced me to get all my images web-ready, so now, whenever anyone is interested in my work, I can email images or send a CD in minutes. Thanks to my web designer, who has linked me up with a lot of other websites and search engines, it's relatively easy for the public to find me. In other words, I'm "Google-able." I haven't had a lot of sales directly from my site, but collectors have found me through it and that has led to sales.

Thanks Marilyn for your time and for sharing some of your experiences that lead you to working in oil pastel and your continued exploration of the medium.

I hope our members will take a minute to check out your website and even consider taking a class with you in the near future. I can tell it would be an enriching experience for anyone wishing to understand oil pastel from your open ended perspective and years of experience in painting and teaching.