

## REVIEW

## Kate Mueller at Art Path Gallery

by Samantha Talbot-Kelly

Art has the wonderful habit of showing up in unexpected places. Often these surprises can inspire quiet human inquiry as we surrender to a play of visual sequences.

Montpelier artist Kate Mueller's pastel works of figure and of landscape shine with these perspectives in mind. Way up in Burlington on Steele Street, behind the Ice House Restaurant, stands the unanticipated Wing Building. It parallels the bike path along the waterfront, grey on the outside, smallish and narrow, yet warm and welcoming on the inside. It tricks us, which is the nifty style of the place. Although there are entrances all around the building, there is only one accessible path to a gallery inside—the vortex of a corridor with hanging art upon its walls appropriately named Art Path. One would have to wear blinders to not get immediately engaged. So I was struck, taken, (OK I'm a sucker for art), but hey, this corridor passage added me to the contents of the building. I wasn't going anywhere.

The corridor is only three to four feet wide, so bumping into people is very likely, and when these bumpings occur you can't help but talk about the art that surrounds you. My encounters were friendly and the art-speak fun.

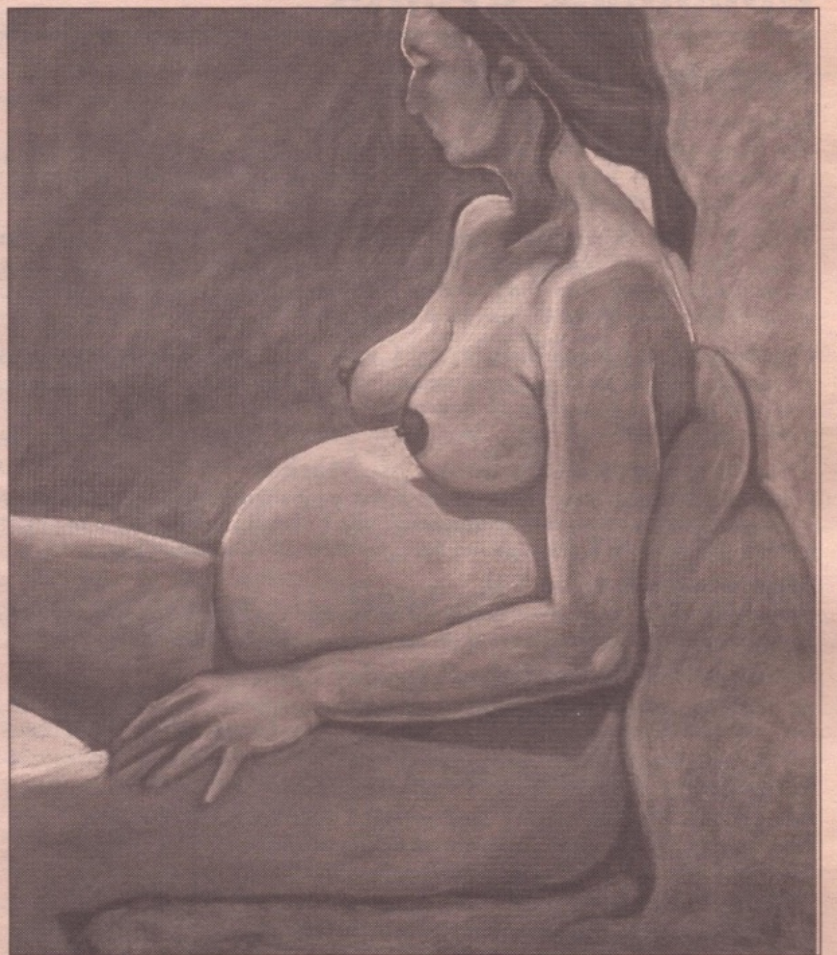
Mueller's pastel nudes and landscapes are created on Canson paper or Sennelier pastel board and are all neatly framed. Figures have always been part of her work, and she started creating from models in 1996. She began studying the natural world with an artistic eye two years ago. Being out of the studio for this landscape series has inspired a grounded and cheerful use of color schemes and vistas. As a body of work, they are color studies reminiscent of Paul Cezanne's preoccupation with light, while designing harmonies and contrasts consciously.

Representing the female figure within a contemporary art context is a loaded undertaking. However, as Mueller's studies show us, it is not a dead end. The female figure has been represented forever in history. It has been a dynamic vehicle for countless intellectual, political, and cultural movements and ideas. Feminist theory, women's liberation in the civil right's era, psychoanalysis, the "male gaze" and female objectification, the evolution of ideals of female beauty, gay and lesbian studies, goddess worship from ancient times, feminist-influenced contemporary art by men are to name only a few of the open-ended discourses surrounding female gender issues in art. Yet Mueller's figures don't wage a campaign for any political end. They reveal a different testimony and story by addressing the theme of female sexuality with great forthrightness along with a quiet complexity. The works are accessible guides to experience place and body and engage us as outgrowths of her thoughts and feelings.

Mueller's work is compelling. After a long time with her pieces, I began to see her figures take the form of landscapes, while her landscapes, through the use of color shape and light, made me very aware of my own body. Let's start with her figures. They are representations of female models who posed for Mueller; some sitting, one reclined, one with her back to the viewer while gazing over her shoulder, another in a diagonal posture drawn from behind seemingly ignoring any reality the artist had discovered while drawing her. Her figures balance color and shape upon the surface handsomely. Her palette strikes the warm and cools with confidence and depth. The color scheme was both realistic and subjective. These framed pastel renderings on paper offer a rich relationship between color and shape—they coexist as one embracing the other in some mysterious symbiotic connection. Together they embody the voluptuousness and sensuality of the figure that takes me back to some of the images in Italian Renaissance paintings, like the Nymph and Venus in *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. Where Botticelli renders the female goddess as a muse we can't possess, Mueller's mythology of the female scores similarly but on a different note. Her women are like strong and reassuring mountains. They are earth. They are concrete. As viewers, we are there to possess them;

to flow into the rolls and valleys of their flesh, and to climb the bosom of their boulderlike chests. *Blazing Nude* of 2005 bypasses the freshness of Botticelli's ethereal light, of his lyrical qualities of human anatomy and of graceful beauty. Instead, her body expresses a ruthlessness, a self-determined power, that she can survive anything. Along with *Blazing Nude*, *Blue-Haired Odalisque*, *Urn*, and *Big Headless Nude* (2005) sit in compressed foregrounds, toned and muscular, assertive and receptive, taking us on a bold adventure. Breasts, thighs, legs, arms, and tummy are rendered with equal mass, gravity, and importance. We are to gaze at the whole of them. Mueller clearly made the choice to not reveal them in pictorial space. Shadows are a mixture of geometry, organic curviness, and boney angularity echoing the cubism of *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Picasso. Because they are magnified in the foreground, as viewers, we cannot get beyond them. When I try, I am captured. They are there to embrace us.

Her other nudes such as *Stacy*, *Back Story*, *First Child*, *Anita*, *Grecian Nude*, all done around 2005, are presented differently than the others. These nudes are contained in an ambiguous interior space, either sitting on a chair, lying down on blankets, or on a bed. These figures embody transitional and reflective moments; engrossed in a dreamlike state, pondering the onslaught of birth and parenting, carrying a troubled frown from some memory, or considering the pros and cons before making a decision. Figure and background fuse organically in planes of color with no detail other than that of anatomy. We see them thinking, feeling, and dreaming. They are engaged with themselves. Their thoughts have planted them there. We could dialogue with them. So I did. I wondered if they liked the "gaze" of the artist. Was modeling just a job or was it an unsettling experience of vulnerability, self-consciousness, power, or powerlessness needing to be triumphed? Perhaps it was an experience of honesty, trust, and liberation. These unknowns intrigued me, despite the impenetrability of no answers. Two theorists among many in art academia who study the concept of the gaze in visual culture are Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. They characterize the gaze as a relationship, both direct and indirect, between the spectator/artist and model. Is the spectator offering, or instigating, a gaze unbeknownst to the model? Or are the models demanding by direct invitation for us to gaze at them? I felt the interaction of both. After



First Child.

momentarily but deeply engaging with these thoughts, I resumed into a more contemplative dance between the emptiness and rhythm of the figures, one that was soaked in colorful events of light and strength before me.

Mueller's landscapes reveal more line, pastel stroke, and movement than the smooth surfaces the stoic models inhabited. In her landscapes, we enter a pictorial space, the illusion of place. Her compositions of Hubbard Park, *Summer River*, and *Grindstone Island 1, 2, and 3* offer us respite in nature. Her expression of space presents light that is penetrable; the contrasts of light and dark are warm and welcoming. She draws in color what she sees and not what others hope to see. This is a subjective process, infusing these unremarkable (though warmly familiar) places with personality. Perhaps then these landscapes become about the artist and not the subject being portrayed. However, one gets the sense Mueller wants to take us there and to enter our own bodies while we are there. Impressionists are renowned for *how* they depicted any given scenario rather than *what* they painted. Well, Mueller's work takes us to both the *how* and the *what*. She wants us to revisit what nature has to offer us and to show us that it can open our corporeal senses. *Grindstone Island 2* invites us down a storybook path in the warm yellows of sunshine with tall grasses by our side. These landscapes command us to unwind our minds, feel the winds in the tall grasses, see the array of colors in the river, find cool shade under the trees from the burning sun. Mueller's invitation to us to sink into the reverie of our bodies allows us to refrain from our constant projections out of our physical being.

Kate Mueller's exhibition at the Art Path Gallery makes me believe that just because art gets characterized by style, content, and context, that doesn't mean that the process of analysis and experience of the work is an unsurprising event.

The Montpelier Bridge is proud to call Kate one of its own. In addition to being an accomplished artist, Kate Mueller does graphic design and layout for The Bridge.



Blue-Haired Odalisque.