



FRAMED BY DESIGN

Patricia Prescott Sueme's pastel works showcase the compositional skills she has developed through decades of determined self-directed study. BY RUTH RODGERS

Rolling orchards. Towering eucalyptus trees. Craggy cliffs. For Patricia Prescott Sueme, a third-generation Californian, these subjects are practically in her blood. She insists, however, that depicting specific landscape elements isn't her primary concern. "Although I'm a representational painter, representation isn't my only focus," she says. "Equally important are the abstractions and subtleties found within a nature-based scene." Whatever the subject, Prescott Sueme's paintings demonstrate her devotion to the goal of refining and simplifying a composition for maximum effect.

Composing the Scene

Prescott Sueme distills her subjects into deliberate compositions, drawing upon her early fine art studies and more than 30 years of experience in graphic design. "When designing a magazine spread, you consider the first read (focal point), the second read and the nuances that may only be noticeable after sitting with it for a while," she says. "Unique color

Day's End
(13x26)

RIGHT
Laurel Canyon
Hike (13x13)

BELOW
On a Silver Platter
(14x14)



combinations, dramatic scale variations, or just interesting use of white space can result in a beautiful layout. Those same rules apply to my fine art.”

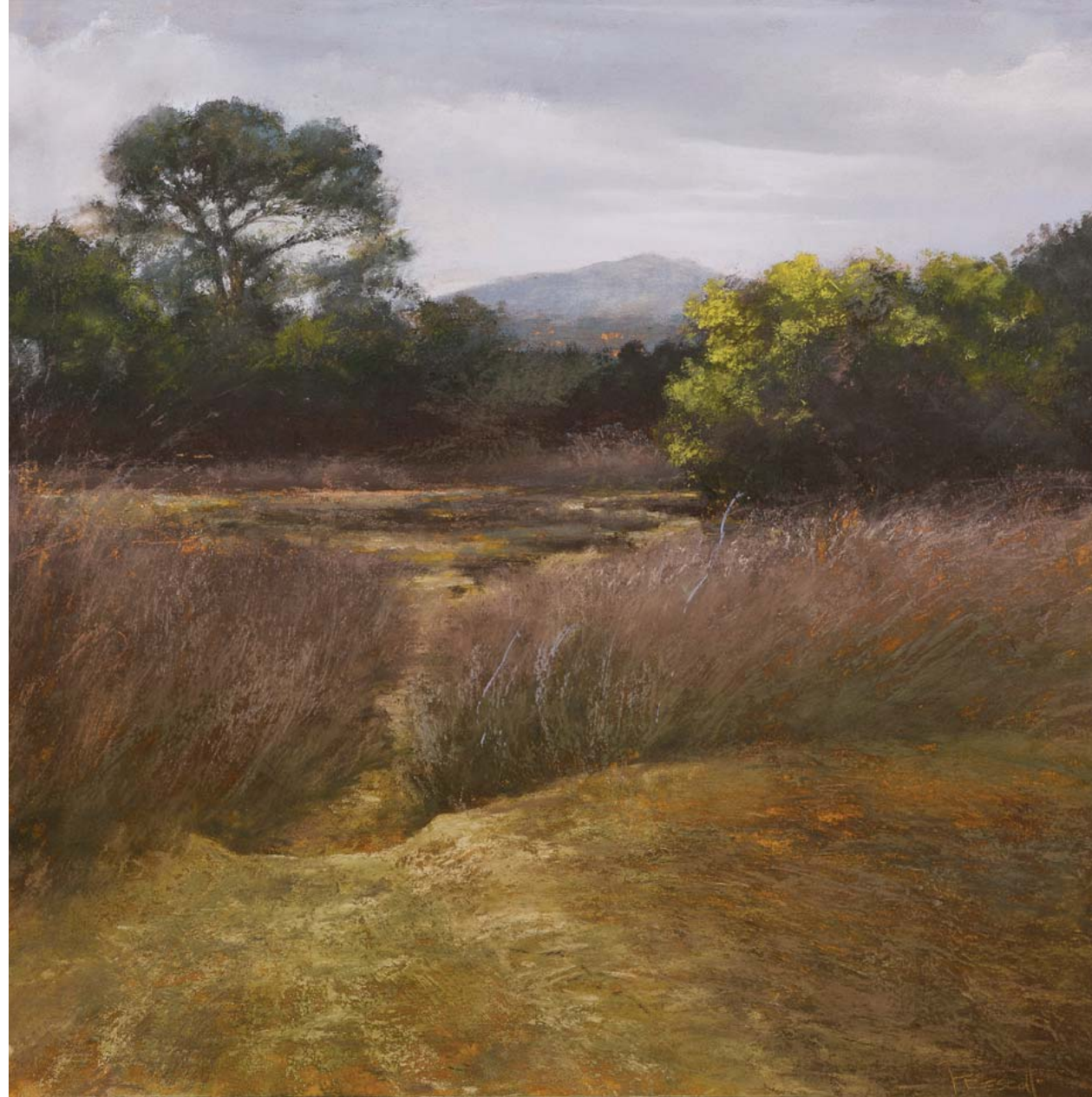
The artist’s initial approach to paintings such as *On a Silver Platter* (above) mirrors the way she responds to a graphic design brief. “I have a few ways I might begin a painting,” she says, “and I’m constantly experimenting with new approaches. The thing that unites them is the goal of achieving that formalist marriage of texture, lighting and layered pastel pigments within a super-simple composition. The placement of shadows and highlights becomes a deliberate part of the composition.”

Early Foundations

That sophisticated approach is the culmination of Prescott Sueme’s long career in the arts. She grew up surrounded by creative people, and she’s quick to credit their influence on her choices and successes.

“My mom’s parents were musicians,” she says. “My grandfather composed for many early television shows and conducted the Desilu Orchestra for the *I Love Lucy* show. When we’d visit them in Laurel Canyon, there was always an actor, soap star or musical theater performer finishing up a voice lesson with my grandmother—who worked well into her 80s.

“My dad’s mom was a hobbyist oil painter. I always loved the smell of her studio, and romanticized her piles



of paintings and supplies. Now, I use her huge, gorgeous double-sided easel every day.”

Prescott Sueme’s sphere of influence also includes several cousins. “My relative Charles Wysocki was, to me, living proof that one could have a thriving career as an artist,” she says. “My cousin, Ann Backstrand, and her husband Greg, are ridiculously talented painters and illustrators. Ann is older than me, and I wanted to be just like her. She studied at ArtCenter College of Design, in Pasadena, Calif., and it became my mission to be accepted there.”

Prescott Sueme’s interest in design surfaced early. “As a kid, I would walk through the grocery aisles with my mom, wanting to redesign every label and package,” she recalls. “My parents provided me with endless art supplies, but they also encouraged me toward a more practical, ‘pay the bills’ way to do what I love. Graphic design seemed like the perfect career for me—one where I could be creative and still afford to buy cute shoes.”

Once she committed to pursuing a career in graphic design, Prescott Sueme chose a route that would offer a well-rounded education. She credits her high school art classes for providing a strong foundation, which was then strengthened by her studies at the Claremont Colleges, a consortium of private colleges in Claremont, Calif. “I studied English and Fine Art for two years,” she says, “both because I needed to build a portfolio and because ArtCenter discouraged students from applying straight out of high school. Back then I considered that an obstacle, but today I view it as a gift, because the variety of art classes I took at the Claremont

FAIR AND SQUARE

A square format appeals to contemporary artists and collectors, but its equal dimensions can present challenges in terms of composition. Prescott Sueme offers some insights on the format and tips for how to make it work.

- A square format provides an opportunity to achieve a perfectly symmetrical composition and/or an interesting, more intimate view.
- The strong geometry of a square frame can highlight other shapes and angles within the composition.
- Artists often use the rule of thirds, placing the subject off-center. In a square format, that is still an option; however, there can also be beauty, and a sense of stillness and calm in the simplicity of deliberately centering an object within a symmetrical square.
- All sides being equal in length encourages the eye to move around the painting in a circle, whereas the eye is typically drawn to move up and down in portrait format, and from side to side in landscape format. As in any format, the use of color, shadows and negative space also influence how the eye moves through a square composition.
- With a square format, an exaggerated low or high horizon line (or even the rarer centered horizon) can make a compelling statement.
- Try filling the frame for a more intimate view. Crop in on the subject matter for a contemporary feel. There’s a sense of less room within the square frame than the rectangular one, lending itself to a simpler, more intimate composition.
- If you’re using pre-made frames you’ll only have a few options for size, and you should create your pieces accordingly. If you custom order your frames, then you needn’t feel limited by size.



Patrick’s Point (10x10)

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— PATRICIA PRESCOTT SUEME

Colleges revealed where my skills and passions lay.”

When Prescott Sueme went on to achieve her goal of acceptance at ArtCenter, the classes she took there honed her skills in long-lasting ways. “I never imagined that the classes I took in color theory, layout, composition and perspective would still influence my compositional method 30 years later, but they do.”

A Nuanced, Innovative Approach

Today, Prescott Sueme is aware of the need to integrate all those influences into her own style. “While I appreciate the formal training and education I received, I’m always looking to absorb new techniques and ideas,” she says. “I’m also constantly striving to regain the naiveté and instinctive quality that we unlearn during formal education.”

As a case in point, the artist developed several innovative approaches to creating underpaintings. Once she has prepared her preferred UArt 280- to 400-grit paper by staining it with a thin pastel/alcohol or ink wash and scribbled a few compositional lines in charcoal, she starts to pull some more unusual tools out of her box.

“I tint Golden Pastel Ground with ink or pastel dust so it’s not too white,” she says. “Then I brush it on selected areas—grasses, trees and sometimes clouds—using old scrubby brushes. The strategic direction of the brushstrokes is based on the elements in the painting I want to stand out as more textured. In the foreground of my painting *Gentle Flow* (opposite, top), I used a small wire brush that’s great for creating even more dimension in the ground and for scraping away thin lines of pastel later in the process. A palette knife or a dull X-Acto knife can also be useful.”

The next steps involve layering and blending subtle backgrounds, working dark to light and finishing with bold strokes that emphasize those textured areas and showcase the medium’s sparkling luminosity.

FROM OILS TO PASTELS

Prescott Sueme didn’t start out using pastels. She began her fine art career with oils, applied in many thin layers to create simple ‘fruitscapes,’ as she names them: small, jewel-like renditions of one or two items in a pared-down setting with dramatic lighting (see *Just a Red Onion*, below). Her first showing of the paintings in this series sold out, a resounding confirmation of her skill, but the artist modestly credits other factors into her success. “These very specific pieces were featured in a show curated by the Lisa Coscino Gallery in Pacific Grove and Studio City, Calif.,” she says, “and that exposed my work to many great collectors. The elements of scarcity, combined with the intimate nature of the work and a room full of collectors, all contributed to the success of that show.” Although she did have several other successful shows with large abstract pieces, the pressures of full-time graphic design work and parenting two small boys limited her fine art efforts for almost a decade following that early exposure.

In 2016, serendipity stepped in. Prescott Sueme inherited a small box of inexpensive Policromi pastels. “I opened the old pastel set from my grandmother the same week a neighbor invited me to a pastel workshop. A very weird coincidence. At the time I’d been thinking about slowing down my 30-year design career, so I thought, *why not?* Sounds fun. By the time of the workshop a couple of weeks later, I’d discovered some very good tutorials on YouTube and read Richard McKinley’s *Pastel Pointers* cover to cover. The love affair had begun.”



Just a Red Onion (9x12)



LEFT
Gentle Flow (9x9)

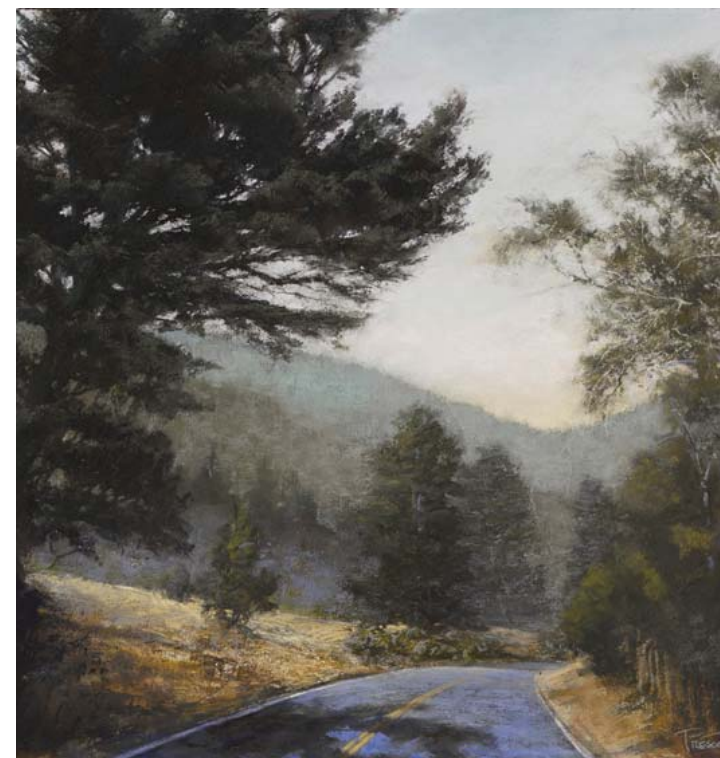
BELOW
The Road Ahead
(14x14)

Although the artist works with a wide variety of pastel brands, including Ludwig, Great American, Schmincke, and Girault, she singles out Diane Townsend’s Terrage pastels as being essential for her final details and flourishes.

Prescott Sueme has a subtle approach to creating her pastel works, from the initial preparation of the paper to the final elements of the framing. She loves UArt’s gritty texture and durability, but she’s specific about the first step of choosing its size and appearance. “I use a straight edge and tear my paper to size because I prefer a torn edge,” she says. “Plus, I discovered early on that cutting it with a knife dulls the blade very quickly.”

She carefully selects the size and shape of the support, depending on the composition she has in mind. “The nice thing about working on paper is that I can easily make it any size I want,” she says. “I like squares. I like grids. I like symmetry.”

After taping the paper carefully to preserve the deckled edge she likes, Prescott Sueme begins painting. She stays alert throughout the process. “My composition and even overall concept often morph as I pay close attention to happy accidents and try not to cover them up,” she says.



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Once the painting is finished, the artist’s personal aesthetic informs the final presentation, as well. “I float my work just above the matboard to showcase the torn edge, and I frame it with a simply profiled dark, gray-washed hardwood,” she says. “A juxtaposition of traditional and modern fits my aesthetic, so the slightly traditional element of my paintings with their square or exaggerated oblong format set within modern but warm wooden frames is ‘me.’ It took me three years to arrive at what I like and what makes budgetary sense.”

Although the expense of museum glass is daunting, Prescott Sueme uses it exclusively because she believes the result is worth the cost.

New Directions

Having achieved significant success with her pastels, including three credits in *Pastel Journal*’s Pastel 100

TOP TO BOTTOM
Crystal Cove 2
(7x15)

Crystal Cove 3
(7x15)

OPPOSITE
Winter Melt (12x6)



competition in recent years, this artist certainly isn’t resting on her well-earned laurels. Now more than ever, she’s planning to master new skills and move forward with new endeavors. “Of course, I want to keep growing as an artist,” she says. “I’ll always continue to learn, possibly playing with mixed media. One thing I’m always searching for is how to balance the intimacy of small work with the scale (and commercial desirability) of larger paintings.”

Prescott Sueme puts a good deal of effort into the business side of being an artist, reaching out to galleries



Patricia Prescott Sueme (prescottstudio.art) grew up in an atmosphere of drawing and painting, surrounded by a family whose lineage overflows with artists and creative people. She graduated with honors from ArtCenter College of Design in 1985. After years of a busy and fulfilling career as a graphic designer, Prescott Sueme finally returned to creating art from her soul and imagination when she began painting again in 2000. Her notable style includes use of her graphic eye along with an obsession for layering and subtleties of color. Her works often comprise pared down, idealized imagery with uncomplicated compositions. She shares her passion for art-making by occasionally teaching workshops and presenting her techniques to her Instagram followers in the hopes that every artist will see the amazing versatility pastel offers.

across the country and building new relationships. “Because the pandemic has closed so many exhibition spaces, I need to overcome my insecurities and begin selling work through my website,” she says. “I also plan to establish an informative, fun email platform as another way to connect

with collectors and artists. Teaching and attending workshops as time allows is also something I love.”

Innovations aside, Prescott Sueme is sure of one thing that has framed her success from the beginning: “I use my maiden name Prescott simply because I was an artist before I was a wife, and I feel it’s a nod to my California heritage every time I sign a painting.” **PJ**

Ruth Rodgers is an award-winning pastelist and former president of Pastel Artists Canada.