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IMPRESSIONS IN PASTEL

A portrait of artist Jan Collins Selman

BY PETER KOENIG

"I see the colors of life, and they become the colors of my paintings that in turn reflect my perceptions and passage," explains Jan Collins Selman of her daily routine in her Falmouth studio. "And after working in the pastel medium for 20 years, I feel that my life — both personally and artistically — began when I moved to the Cape in 1978."

A highly versatile artist who paints figures and objects as well as landscapes, Jan Selman works in oil and watercolor; however, most Cape art dealers associate her with brilliant pastels like *September Sails - Symphony in Green*. This recently completed work depicting sea, sky, and motion is a dominant horizontal seascape of greens and blues, with breaking shallow waves in the lower fore-

ground and a solitary small sailboat on the distant horizon.

"It was a crisp, clear September day off Nobska Point," she recalls. "I recorded one set of sails on the horizon and my sensual colorist impressions of that season and quality of light."

In *September Sails - Symphony in Green* there is indeed a transparency of green light in the moment before the wave breaks, and the brown and gray pastel strokes in the lower form effectively become the gravely, sandy shore. It is a true impression of light indicative of a skilled and accomplished impressionist artist.

"I search for light and try to let it come through," Selman explains as she gazes at the pastel on the easel.

"I like the challenge of pastel and my technique is all chalk work of lines or

(*March Thaw — Edge of the Bog 22" X 28" Pastel.*

IMPRESSIONS IN PASTEL

broader tonal areas using the side of the pastel. When I relive this painting, I can smell the salt air — and at once I am also reaching for the truth behind the objects.”

Pastel works of art are traditionally defined as either “drawings” or “paintings,” and Selman prefers the term pastel paintings, “because I put layer upon layer of the chalk. All I can see is color and more color, and I sometimes have to fight with myself to resolve those colorist decisions, as well as selection of the view, the form combinations, what shall be included, and what will be left out. The design in its finality and its related colors become the subject, and the objects then emerge as the landscape, boat or figure that we are already familiar with.

“Some things I like to picture have a certain ‘earth tightness’ to them, and I feel that my subject selections are without limitations and expand into the future — over the limitless horizon of my concepts — and into the light of exploratory dimension.”

The inducements of her surroundings upon an artist are especially relevant to the work of Jan Selman, for it is obvious that she cherishes the place she has chosen to live. And her Cape Cod surroundings do serve as the subject — as well as the inspiration — for her most popular work. Examples of this influence and direction could be seen in Selman’s presentations at a recent group exhibition at the Cape Gallery in Falmouth.

One painting entitled *Morning Reflections*, — a small oil not larger than 24 inches horizontally — displays a group of six or seven skiffs and dinghies clustered against a dock, their contrasting hues perfectly reflected in the mirror stillness of their supporting platform of

water. The boats and water dominate the horizontal composition and occupy the lower half of the image. The upper half contrasts with open expanses of moving water: a line of marsh-grassed horizon and a single distant miniature white hull against the shore. The upper water flickers in light and dark through tonal contrast, but reaches its most persuasive visual sensibility through the artist’s very painterly brush work.



Morning Reflections 12" X 24" Oil.

In an additional demonstration of a highly selective eye, a keen sense of design and a clarity of dramatic focus, Selman adjusts and resolves both the composition and the viewer’s sensibility through a careful balance of the isolated craft within an oval of reflective surface and against the massive cluster of dominant boat forms.

“I work from the scene, from the objects, from sketches, photographs and from memory,” says the artist. “But the final work is always executed in the studio — although source material, such as sketches, provide notations.

“I am influenced by the color of Monet, the mood of Whistler, and the atmosphere of Turner,” she says, “and I find an endless source of related pattern, color, design and subject throughout the Cape.”

Unlike Monet and many other impres-

sionists of the past and present, Selman is highly conscious of the preservation of her works. Her paintings are done on four-ply museum board, and her finished work is similarly matted and framed, assuring a museum-quality strictness and longevity.

This concern for the future of her work derived its beginnings years ago in Boston, where Jan Collins began to draw at age 12. She won awards in the *Boston Globe* National Scholastic Art Competition during her high school years, as well

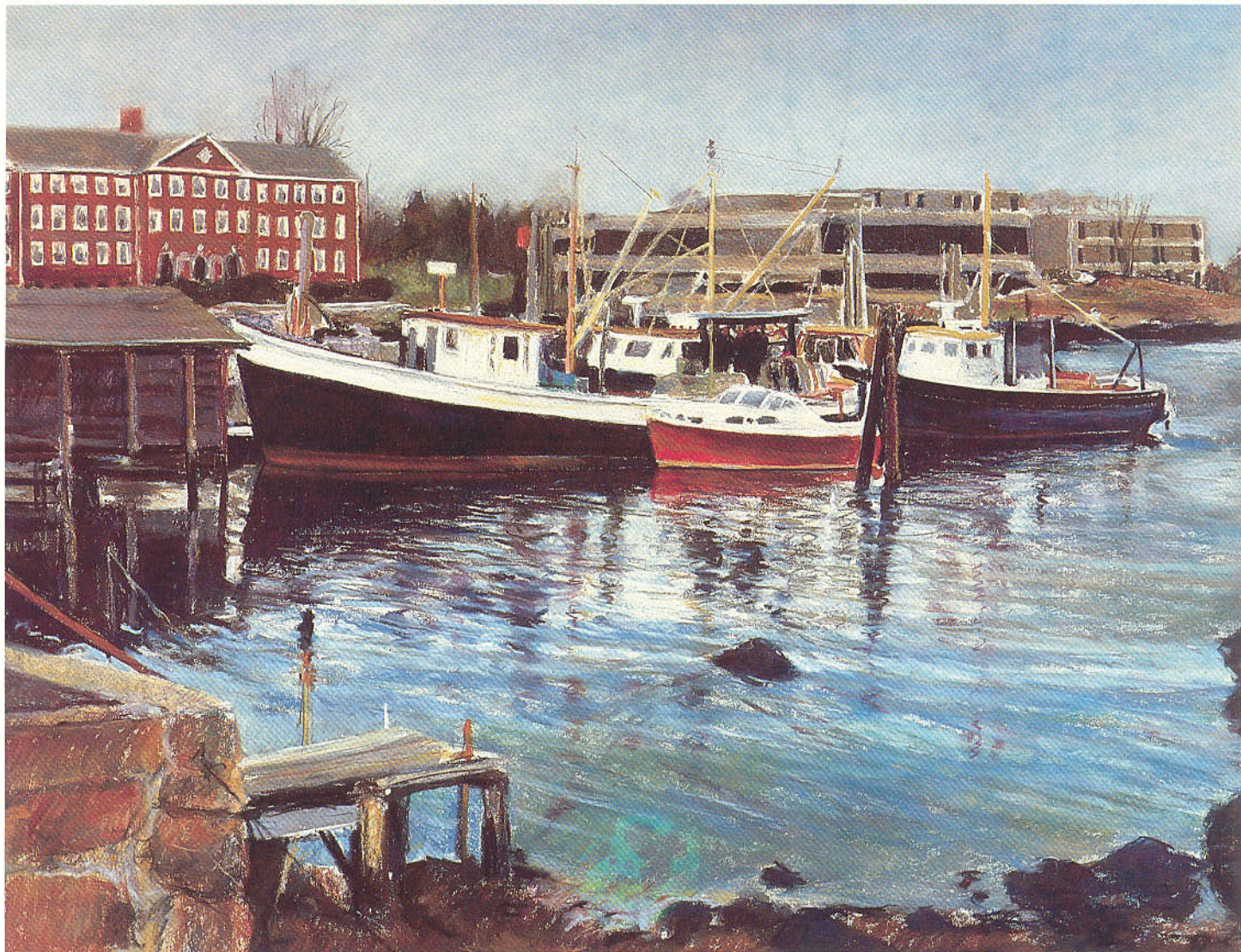
as a scholarship to the School of Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. She was introduced to the pastel medium by the tenth grade — the medium that was to inspire developing recognition of her work nearly 20 years later. Selman finally began to develop an initial sensibility for the chalk, its appropri-

ate application and its diverse colorist potential.

“No one, at the time of my early explorations, really knew how to use pastel in my classes,” she says now, “and I remember a lot of scrubbing and smearing and frustrations with my disasters. It took a lot of years to begin to learn the technique — to finally get it to work — to get it to look right.”

During her senior year in high school Selman audited drawing, anatomy, and design classes at the Massachusetts College of Art. “It was my first really structured learning and art experience,” she recalls, “and also provided insight into how ideas in art are developed.”

At the Boston Museum of Fine Arts school, her teachers included the painter T. Lux Feininger and sculptor Harold Tovish. “This was a completely new world for me,” she says in retrospect.



Woods Hole — The Edge of Eel Pond 20" X 26" Pastel.

“It was a world of more abstract concepts, a more independent approach to education, a total immersion in the art students’ life of creativity, bicycles, guitars, and new associations. My one-to-one critiques in painting with Feininger are still memorable and my print-making classes, particularly wood cuts with Ture Bengtz continue to influence me today.”

After these initial formative years at the museum school, the young artist married and her personal and family life continued with a major absence of art, its production, study and related development until the late 1960s when Selman began to paint again. Then, through gallery representation, she realized a series

of murals in Boston area banks.

“I completed nearly 50 mural commissions in the Greater Boston area,” she remembers. “They were very large paintings, averaging nearly five by 20 feet each, executed in a mixed media technique of acrylic paint and collage materials. I was paid by the square inch of canvas.”

Some of these early developmental pieces may still be seen at the NeWorld Bank in both Alston and Charlestown, and at the Bank of Boston in Boston and some suburban locations. The murals, executed from 1969 to 1975 were varied subject combinations commissioned by the banks to relate to their individual lo-

cations and constituency. The Bank of Boston’s six-foot by 24-foot painting shows the Nantasket Amusement Park with its roller coaster, and is vibrant in its bright colors and stylized in its recognizable and objective descriptions.

“The [NeWorld Bank] mural is a triptych, a painting in three parts, about 24 feet long,” Selman explains, “and they requested a boating theme, so I designed a scene of ships and masts against a vibrant sunset and also used the form of a large anchor as a curving design device to assist the unity of the composition.” These murals may possibly provide a comparison and perspective of that ten-year period to Selman’s more recent work

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that has now developed an extensive and impressive regional reputation.

By the early 1970s Selman was painting with consistency and haunting public libraries where she became more familiar with the work of historical artists such as the French painters Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso.

"Impressionism really captivated me and particularly Monet's landscapes of color and light," she recalls from that time in her life. "The oriental feeling in his landscapes that combines line with mass and tone, the circular patterns in his paintings contrasted with his strong horizontals, and his use of blue against red and green still provide a standard for my work."

Selman continues to admire equally the emotionalism in the paintings of 19th century British artist J.M.W. Turner. She describes his paintings as "circu-

lar motifs with the sky wrapped around the sea, waves reaching up to capture the sun, and his interpretation of nature as a highly emotionalized interaction of movement, color, and search for light in a spontaneous, yet controlled design."

After settling in Falmouth and developing a studio work routine supported by a frame shop where she learned conservation framing, Selman began serious experimentation with pastels. Her contact with local artists encouraged her.

"I listened to those people who were really involved in the art world. The painter Edith Bruce, founder and director of the Woods Hole Gallery, suggested I search further in myself, my surroundings, and in my painting. She emphasized the importance of thematic work, continuity in imagery, and looking at what my backyard said to me.

IMPRESSIONS IN PASTEL

"I became familiar with the paintings of the West Falmouth artist Kathy Twombly and loved the emotion and excitement in her very abstract work. Hers was a different and very refreshing approach for me, and I learned also about freedom of color usage from her.

"My paintings at this time were more rose and dark, and after an initial period of rejection from local competitive exhibitions I began to recognize and assimilate content indigenous to the Cape landscape, as well as certain tendencies in the paintings of Monet, James McNeil

Whistler, and J.M.W. Turner," she explains.

"I was at the very beginning of developing self-confidence, a sensitivity to new ideas in painting, and had the good fortune to know a supportive community of friends.

"Falmouth and the Cape have been more than good to

"Falmouth and the Cape have been more than good to me. Through this community and my work in art I have found myself. I have realized my life."

me. Through this community and my work in art I have found myself. I have realized my life. I realized landscape as a theme, impressionism as a style. I lightened my palette and began to produce work that encouraged my continuity, supported me spiritually, and at once slowly forged my entry to a sense of professionalism."

Individual exhibitions of Selman's work have now been held at the Teufel-Veselig Gallery in Cotuit, the Hermine Merel Smith Gallery in Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard, the Cape Cod Conservatory in West Barnstable, and at Al Mack's Gallery, the Cape Gallery of Contemporary Art, and the Market Barn Gallery in Falmouth.

Currently, she is represented by Gallery One on Nantucket, the Cape Gallery and the Market Barn Gallery in Falmouth, and

the Hermine Merel Smith Gallery on Martha's Vineyard. The price range of her pastels and oils is now \$400 to \$3,500, and she says she is having difficulty meeting the growing demand for her work.

"When I wake up in the morning," she says, "I am immediately in love with the knowledge of my continuity in art, the knowledge of being thus privileged. I try to paint every day — and it's exciting to realize completion of current work — as well as speculative expectation of new images, scenes, designs, and resolutions of color and form.

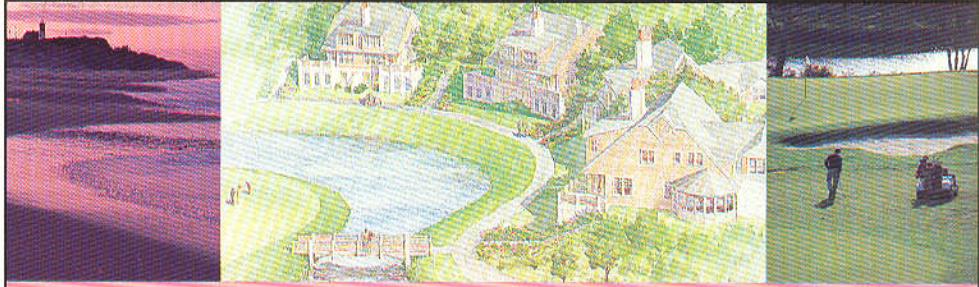
"My work has been strongly landscape oriented, as an expression of my perception of the interaction of life, growth and nature. It has its own characteristics, and I observe it in my special way as the reinforcement of the human spirit. The earth is there, it is solid, it is security, it is my warmth. I have never questioned loving it, and after so many years of the city's hard geometry the softness of the natural landscape is like going home."

Encouraged by the developing popularity of her work, by the continuity of interest by collectors throughout the Cape as well as in the Boston area, and by the acquisition of two of her pastel landscapes by the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury for permanent collection, Selman says she now has experienced a sense of relaxation, "being myself, and finally, after all this time — becoming comfortable with life and developing image, idea, and technique in my work."

In her landscapes, the ambiguity of abstract passages combine with the experienced and more objective pictorial elements in a Monet-like presence of color and form as subject. These painterly and visual notations present a moving contrast with continuing reference not only to the impressionist innovations of Monet, but also to the later associations of these ideas becoming abstractions in the work of the expressionists William De Kooning, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell in New York in the 1940s and 1950s.

Selman's poetic pastel interpretations of local and regional themes also include

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studies of the human figure, and the artist's versatility encompasses and controls her technical virtuosity and spirit of adventure that is a primary requirement in all creative activity.

"I am working on a more solid idea of the human figure," she says, "and I am very familiar with traditional objectivity in figurative interpretations. I am searching for a better concept, and I think there will be greater clarity in my future work."

Selman's careful subject and design investigation, compositional selection and interpretation of elements and forms in a single painting are effectively demonstrated in her recent pastel of Eel Pond in Woods Hole titled *Woods Hole, The Edge of Eel Pond*.

Her painting combines the luminosity and reflections of the waters of the harbor — an effect she superbly articulates in varied compositions — with her ability to handle diverse forms: as in the very solid and convincing hull shapes of three traditional fishing vessels at dock. Additionally, she includes two large buildings of the village's Marine Biological Laboratory that at once contrast and complement an older structure in red brick with one of the institute's newest in a modern style.

The complete composition works in an oval pattern, leading the viewer's eye from the soft flickering ripples in multi-colored water through small areas of shore, stone dock forms, and to the distant shore that becomes, together, the architectural scene and horizon. The fishing vessels at the center of this image add both the focus and contrast to these natural and man-made elements.

"I wanted to love the view that I would be working on," she says in describing the development of this painting. "I spent several days looking, sketching, making notations and taking photographs. From the historical intent and viewpoint I wanted to include a part of the old structure, as well as the new architecture."

The work had been commissioned as one of a series of historical sites in Falmouth executed by different local ar-

tists, and Selman had selected this subject from a list of sites.

"I am more comfortable with something just a little bit different than what some artists would do," she winks.

Selman began with three days of notetaking and exploratory photography of the location's form, color and light. She says she wanted to analyze the changing effect of light from mid-morning to mid-afternoon and record the comings and goings of the fishing and research craft. The important relationship of water and boats to the purpose of the Marine Biological Laboratory is an unusual one for a harbor, and she didn't want to miss it in the pursuit of simple aesthetic considerations.

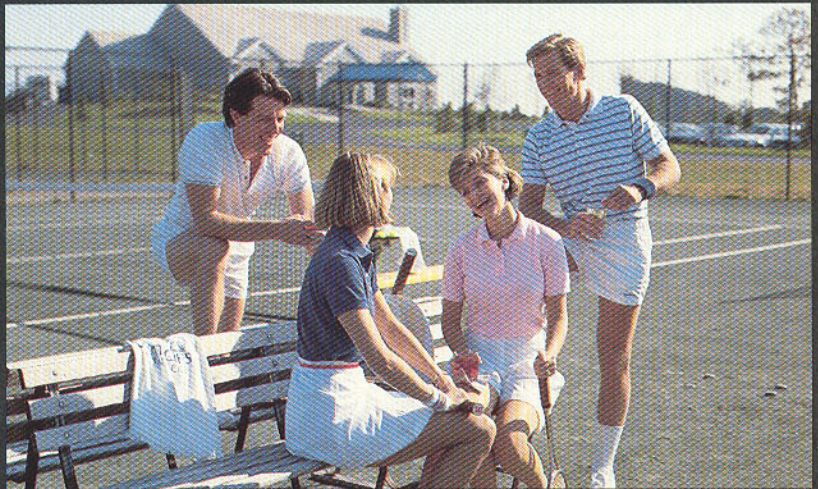
"It now all ties in well together," she says as she reviews the painting in her studio, "and my combination of horizontals and smaller verticals within the overall oval of the design provides a softness with counter movement and action."

Pastel is a spontaneous, yet difficult medium, and many painters avoid it to favor oil or acrylic. Pastel is Selman's most effective material, and she says she often "scumbles" — that is, applies many applications of opaque color — and she adds, "I work quickly. I spray in some areas, and some areas of this painting were steamed for effect. I warm the paper with steam, and it gives a graininess like air. It's like a glaze. I can get a large flat area by soaking the pastel in water. In the end, I use only water as a fixative."

Some areas of her paintings are lightly done, while other parts with intense color require multiple applications of color over color — at times five or six layers. The longer she paints, she says, the more she feels the necessity to bring the painting and the viewer closer and closer together.

"I want the viewers to feel comfortable in the environment of the work; I want them to stay with it," she says. "When you are an artist, *you* are an artist, and I am in love with the knowledge of my continuity in art, my awareness of being thus privileged." □

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