

A Marked Intuition

BY AMY LEIBROCK

BRE BARNETT CROWELL LETS HER WORK FLOW ORGANICALLY, AN APPROACH THAT YIELDED A PRIZEWINNING PAINTING OF SUBLIME COLOR AND MOVEMENT.

Nandina Graffiti (30x22)

“YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW YOUR PATH IN A PAINTING; the painting will tell you where it needs to go,” says Bre Barnett Crowell, winner of the *Pastel Journal* Award of Excellence for her abstract work, *Nandina Graffiti*. “This one told me to keep making lines and to keep making gestures.”

In much of her work, Crowell often doesn’t know what a painting is about until she finishes it. As she’s making marks and gestures, she says her subconscious mind is also at work. “I get so swept up in the process of an abstract work; sometimes I don’t recognize what’s influencing me and what’s coming out until I sit back and look,” she says. “It might relate to something in my life or something I’ve seen that morning.”

When the native North Carolinian finished her prize-winning painting, she realized that it looked like foliage in her Charlotte, N.C., yard. It was a crazy and confusing version of a nandina plant, as if it had been painted in graffiti style, which led to the painting’s title.

Abstract & Non-Objective Category Juror Colette Ody Smith was drawn to the painting’s mix of fine lines and lively motion. “This is an absolutely lyrically beautiful

piece that’s delicate without being weak or decorative,” she says. “The placement of descriptive marks is masterfully balanced against subtle open passages. The energy conveyed with color and movement hits just the right notes.”

Making Marks With Purpose

Crowell painted this work on Canson Edition, a heavy printmaking paper she primed with clear Liquitex gesso to give it tooth. The artist started it like many of her other abstract pastel paintings—by making intuitive marks with graphite and charcoal to establish an initial composition. “I have certain marks that my brain or my hand likes,” she says. “They’re organic and non-architectural in nature, curvilinear and searching.”

Once Crowell makes those initial compositional marks, she brushes on SpectraFix. “I dip the brush into the fixative and then go back over my marks, which are primarily done in charcoal,” she says. “It just makes a wonderful, watery sort of underpainting with interesting drips. I don’t know exactly what I’m going to get.” The wet fixative enables Crowell to edit at this stage. She can blot out parts or go back into the work with charcoal and make marks in the surface. “That gives me a good structure as far as the composition, and it also provides a strong value map,” she says. “Sometimes it changes, but it’s a good way to start. I usually do that before any color is added.”

Some thin black and gray underpainting marks are still visible in the upper portion of *Nandina Graffiti*, but most of the underpainting is usually covered in Crowell’s final paintings. Once she begins adding color, she sometimes goes back in with charcoal or graphite to redirect herself or to emphasize certain elements of the composition.

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neutralized colors that are still either warm or cool, but not so vivid.”

Crowell likes Terry Ludwig and chunky SoHo pastels. In *Nandina Graffiti*, she also used a touch of a Diane Townsend light green iridescent. She likes the Canson Edition paper not only for the weight but its deckled edges; to show them off, the artist floats her pieces on top of a mat.

At Home With Abstract

“When I picked up art again in middle age, that’s when my real education started,” says Crowell. Despite majoring in art at the University of North Carolina, she had pursued a corporate career after graduation and didn’t have time for art-making, even as a hobby, for many years. Once she was able to put the pressure and travel of a sales job behind, her thoughts returned to art—and to a set of Sennelier pastels that had been languishing in a drawer for two years.

Crowell had always enjoyed figure drawing and charcoal, but she says she never saw a stick of pastel in art school. When she finally took out her box of pastels and enrolled in a pastel course at Queens University of Charlotte 14 years ago, she fell in love with the medium. “I love the pure pigment,” she says. “It’s just such a direct and forceful way to put down color. I’ve loved making marks with the pastel and seeing all the different things it can do.”

Crowell continued to take pastel workshops, producing expressive figurative work, but a 2010 class with Ann Templeton shifted her focus to the abstract genre. “I just felt right at home, and I knew that’s where I should be,” Crowell says. One of the hallmarks of her work throughout this evolution is her characteristic mark-making, which has been a thread that runs through all of her work.

Exploration and Experimentation

Crowell says she’s still learning and exploring. Recently, she has been experimenting with multimedia, using liquid acrylics and inks and



TOP
Caledonia No. 3
(20x24)

ABOVE
In the Wild Sunday
(21x27)

When it’s time to add color, she likes to explore color relationships. In *Nandina Graffiti*, Crowell chose complementary greens and reds as the dominant colors, incorporating different values of each. The reds, for instance, range from purple to rich orange-brown reds. “I’m trying to establish colors in different values and strengths, or chromas,” says Crowell. “I think it’s really interesting to have, in the same painting, some more

then making marks using charcoal and pastel. "I love the combination of the two," she says. "I can really get a nice variety of marks, and using both creates a slightly different look than a 100 percent pastel piece, but it's been a learning curve."

An unexpected benefit that has sprung from Crowell's later-in-life art career is the fellowship she has found with fellow artists in her community. Crowell and a group of the beginner students with whom she took her first pastel class founded the Piedmont Pastel Society. She's also a member of an abstract artist group that meets monthly to critique one another's works in progress. "I can't

Lilacs Dancing (30x22)



imagine what my life would be like if I wasn't an artist," she says. "It has given me the opportunity to meet people of like minds and whose company I really enjoy. It has been a wonderful, fulfilling experience."

Crowell says she's thrilled that an abstract work received this Pastel 100 recognition. Sometimes people tell her they struggle to understand abstract art. "They don't realize that's OK," the artist says. "What a piece means to me might be something different than what it means to others who view it."

Crowell doesn't let that kind of feedback discourage her. "You have to give yourself permission to explore and experiment," she says. "Just do it for the joy of it, and something good will come of it. As an abstract artist, it's very fulfilling to know that the direction I love going in is something that other people appreciate." **PJ**

Amy Leibrock is a Cincinnati-based freelance writer and content manager.



Bre Barnett Crowell (brevardfineart.com) is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America, a Master Circle member of the International Association of Pastel Societies, a member of Excellence in the Southeastern Pastel Society and a founding board member of the Piedmont Pastel Society. Her landscape, figurative and abstract works have been awarded in many national juried shows and have appeared in numerous publications. Corporate collections include The Cannon Foundation, The Voci Center, Signature Health and Duke University. A native North Carolinian, she attended the University of North Carolina, where she earned a BA in studio art. She's represented by Studio 21, and Coffey and Thompson, in Charlotte, N.C.