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CREATIVITY

'Scumbling' in a Studio of Her Own

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After World War II, a group of bombastic American artists were making their mark on the international art scene. Painter Jane Wilson knew many of the convention-shattering Abstract Expressionists, including Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.

Then in the 50's, Mrs. Wilson set off in a radical new direction of her own: painting realistic landscapes. "One day in the '50s I just woke up one morning thinking about painting and everybody is painting wildly abstractly and being very serious and macho, and I thought, 'Oh, I really like subject matter.' "

Today, at the age of 86, Ms. Wilson is helping to rejuvenate a long overlooked genre of painting. She is seen as a bridge between the realistic and figurative painters of the late 1950s and the Abstract Expressionists. Though her works stand out for being in touch with real places, she has infused landscapes with the lessons of her friends. Her work

has broken the mold of conventional landscapes: They are not a celebration of old-time beauty. They are intimate, spare and horizontal.

"Jane Wilson is a very important American because she captures this sense of being in touch with a real place," says Elisabeth Sussman, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Ms. Wilson's paintings have been acquired by the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, among others.

Ms. Wilson starts each new work with a horizontal line near the bottom of the canvas. Not necessarily a bold line, but something she can use to orient herself. "I know I want a lot of sky," she said. "My subject is really atmosphere and the quality of air as we live it. That's what I think about: the vitality in surrounding spaces."



Ms. Wilson prefers a canvas grain that's slightly coarser than fine portrait linen, one that brings out the texture of the paint. She relies on "scumbling," in which layers of paint are built up to create a shimmery effect, to give her work its depth and vitality.

"They aren't smooth layers," she said. "They are layers you put on roughly so that you can see through them. It's like being outdoors."

In each painting she tries to build in some sort of glow. Part of it is technical, she said, in that the inner structure of the painting, the initial layers of paint, must have a pale color.

Then she builds alternating layers. "They begin to build up, and they begin to do something you can't anticipate," she said. "It starts to lead you, and you have no choice but to follow."

She uses oil paints manufactured by a variety of companies, but prefers those made by Winsor & Newton. Brushes, she said, should be sturdy, well-shaped and responsive. She no longer stretches her own canvases, saying, "It's a serious, heavy-duty craft. You may as well be in the upholstery business."

A painting can take four or five sittings to finish, or four or five years. "You get stuck," she said. "You don't know what the hell is going on. You get mad at the painting so you turn its face to the wall. And then one day you turn it around and you think, 'Oh, I know what's wrong. And why couldn't I see it before?' But I couldn't see it before. So I proceed from there. And I think most people work like that. I'm working on many, many paintings at the same time. The more the better."

At the [DC Moore Gallery](#) in New York, which represents Ms. Wilson, her abstract but emotional paintings have names like "Muggy Blue of August," "Hurricane Silence" and "Nasty Weather." "You have to name your paintings," she said. "It's basically a filing system. I try to name them with a term that triggers the quality of the image, the time of the day, the mood."

Ms. Wilson has a small studio in the back of her New York apartment. The idea of a studio sounds important, she said, but in the end all a painter needs is a place she can call her own, enough room for equipment, and the ability to move freely. Then, she said, "You're off and going."

Though she sometimes takes photographs of the sky or the beach because she likes them, she doesn't use photographs as visual aids. "What I need to do is remember what it felt like to stand there. Take a breath and be there, and then I know what to do."

BRUSHSTROKES

- Ms. Wilson says that she is able to paint at any time of the day, but she prefers "early afternoon on until 4 p.m. or something, when the light begins to change."

- Ms. Wilson almost always listens to music while painting. One favorite of hers is Francis Poulenc, a French composer who she says had a particularly painterly approach to his work: "He's always been a favorite. I also listen to early 17th century music a lot. I don't think of it visually except that it has a kind of rhythm to it, an insistent beat that is present in the act of looking. It's a kind of pulse, and it seems to me pretty central to everything."

- Unlike most landscape painters, Ms. Wilson doesn't set up an easel in a field. She paints entirely from memory. "My landscapes exist in my head only."

- She often visits the beach when on eastern Long Island. She said she "likes the idea of standing on the edge of the continent."

- She seeks inspiration from painters of other genres, from other times. The painting she most admires is Francisco de Zurbaran's funeral of a senior churchman, painted in 1629. "The colors spark each other, and they do something to the retina. There is this action going on in the vitality of the colors."