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Interview: Jill Soukup at Abend Gallery

By Suzanne Morris

It's after hours at Abend Gallery but rush hour traffic still floods the intersection of Colfax and York where the gallery's white façade stands with something of a modest nobility—a distinction that surrounds almost everything and everyone at Abend. Artist Jill Soukup ("pronounced 'soak up'—like a sponge," according to her business cards) lets me in through the front door in her relaxed, friendly demeanor, which seems to affect even the swing of her blonde ponytail. Before we sit down to chat, she shows me some of her paintings



Boy in Blue, 7" x 5", Oil on canvas

she's chosen to exhibit during her upcoming, one-woman show at Abend from October 10 through 31. Recently, her realist oil paintings have focused primarily on pets and barnyard animals, which will feature prominently in the show, but will contrast with a number of impressively detailed, urban architectural oils as well. While the two subject matters seem an odd pairing, her approach to each subject has been heavily influenced by the other—the simplicity of animal paintings has brought a "simplicity to the city paintings," which otherwise are quite complex, and vice versa. All of the works Jill plans to exhibit are new—produced within a three-month period, an astonishing feat, considering the detail and perfection in each piece. But, as I talk with her, the love of her work is obvious, and the prolific output doesn't seem quite as supernaturally miraculous. Jill's commentary on her work, its process, and her progress as an artist, reveal the serious dedication behind her industriousness.

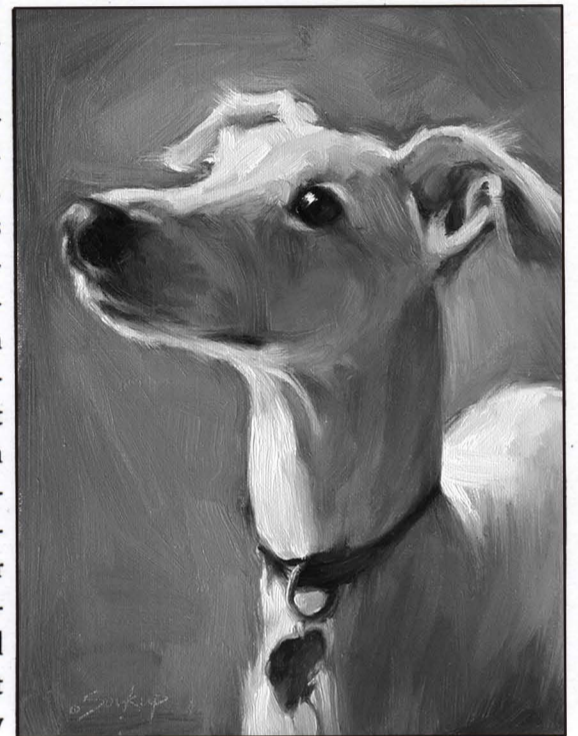
Jill, like most artists, recognized early on her artistic proclivity as well as her affinity for animals, which might have had something to do with her dad's veterinary practice: "There were always animals around." By the time high school hit, Jill was drawing animals with pastels and perfecting drawings of horses, in particular. Her mark of high school posterity, in fact, can still be found in the mural she painted in one of the



Historic Tree, 12" x 16", Oil on canvas

hallways of Smoky Hill High School. When faced with the college decision, she opted for a more practical graphic arts degree from CSU, which has come in quite handy for her PR designs—and for impressing those with whom she works, as Christine Serr, Abend's owner, who has been quietly listening, interjects, "It is a pleasure to work with an artist who is tech-savvy." Most importantly, Jill relies upon Photoshop to design a piece's composition, which weighs heavily in her selection of a work's specific subject. "[It] doesn't depend on subject matter . . . [it] comes down to how composition inspires me in an abstract manner." From a digital photo of the potential subject, Jill will experiment with the cropping, producing a number of black-and-white differing crops of the original photo. Once she's made her compositional choice, she sketches the subject and carries out "color studies," to find a precise palate. How does she maintain the apparent excitement in her approach to painting? Jill attributes it to her frequent "change of location"—some of the featured urban landscapes are from a recent trip to NYC, while most of the animals are residents of a farm she visited.

The mention of the abstract in her approach prompts me to ask whether Jill has ever worked purely in the abstract. Although she has shown abstract work previously at an Abend abstract exhibit, she's eager to devote more time to it. "I would love to do [more] abstracts," she responds, at which point Chris mentions the possibility of an abstract show next year. Like Jill's enthusiasm for her work, a trusting, collaborative relationship between she and Chris is evident in their conversational rapport, which began with a juried show a few years back, when Chris recognized Jill's talent. Since then, Jill has had several exhibits at Abend and has, as a result, built up a base of "quite a few faithful collectors," as Chris puts it, and "every year, [they] add a few more." It is Chris' love and support of local artists that has made Abend one of Denver's top critically acclaimed galleries, most recently by *5280*, which dubbed it "The Best Art Gallery for the New Collector." Her involvement in community fundraising (usually involving the arts) has also contributed to Chris' mission to devote Abend to local art. When asked whether she had anything else to add in the discussion of arts support, Chris wants, above all else, a mention of an upcoming kick-off party, to benefit a DPS after-school art program, which will take place metro-wide on November 19. She is also excited about Jill's artist demonstration, as part of the exhibit, at Abend from 12:00 to 4:00pm on October 11. Jill Soukup's one woman show runs from October 10 through 31, 2003, with an opening reception October 10, from 5:00 to 9:00pm.



Guinness Poised, 8" x 6", oil on canvas



Gates Rubber Company, 5" x 7", Oil on canvas