

Meet Jill Soukup



A portrait in duality and

Artist Jill Soukup's work incorporates a strong duality that defines her interpretation of the world.



balance

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Opposites. Comparisons. Yin and yang. Dark and light. Thought and feeling. These capture artist Jill Soukup's approach to her art and her life. She explores the concept of balance and beauty achieved through polarities.

Take the two terms most frequently applied to her works: painterly and representational. "Painterly" refers to the physical quality of paint and its strokes, frequently applied to work in which rough brush strokes and even the impact of tools or fingers on sculpting materials are not disguised or refined. The physical qualities of the media become part of the impact of the art.

"Representational," on the other hand, describes art that stands in for and takes the place of something else. It resembles reality, in which objects are identifiable. "Painterly" and "representational" are not mutually exclusive, but they are two distinct approaches.

The painterly is present for Soukup in the thick layers of oils she manipulates with brush and palette knife, the care she takes and the work she may do over and over to obtain just the right color, depth or angle. The representational is her subject matter, frequently horses and urban landscapes, in themselves an unusual dichotomy.

Why horses, so fluid, so natural, living and breathing creatures? Equally pertinent, why urban landscapes, often devoid of fauna (animal or human) and replete with angles and edges?

The answer is that both become the subjects of the diverse approach that allows Soukup to explore her concepts to the utmost. Each painting is part of a process — an attempt to simplify seemingly convoluted struggles between opposites.

There is a tension between two extremes and also a symbiosis.

Duality is not necessarily antagonism but a dependency of each half on the other. Just as one can rightly ask if happiness can exist without sadness, a viewer of Soukup's art sees that shadow enhances light, hard edges heighten soft blurs, and a dark area amplifies the impact of a bright color. As Soukup explains, "I am fascinated with the idea that duality defines the human existence and how we interpret the world. I see its omnipresence in nature, spirituality, within people's contrary perspectives, through all of man's shortcomings and triumphs — and in its persistent challenge to my own personal values and truths."

ART AS LIFE

The artist continues, "From the dishes in my sink to a bustling city scene, I find inspiration everywhere: in the interplay of shapes, values, edges, textures and colors. Intuition and a sense of composition bring these elements together."

Western art, which depicts the life of Western America through cowboys, Indians, ranches and images of Western life, is ever fashionable. Fortunately, her childhood fascination with horses continued into adulthood and became part of her repertoire, paying off in the popularity of her work with collectors. Her studies of horses in a variety of sizes and poses sell well. Yet her approach is to take apart the animals, reassemble or modify a shadow, color, line. She may turn a piece on its side, effectively making it abstract, in order to achieve a vision from her mind. She asks herself about the similarities and differences between various components and how they come together in a unified end.

The physicality of paint again makes its appearance as a lure. "Drawing (a



Soukup's work is part of the upcoming Women of the West exhibition, showcasing some of the country's finest artists.

covering that despite their contrasts, they share and exchange the same tendencies.

"I really need to understand the technical aspect of the work," Soukup says. A typical approach to a new piece often begins with a digital photo, then to computer, then to manipulating parts of the image to make compositional choices — in some sense an abstract structure and balance. Later, a small study in oil may be repeated in sequence to test changes in emphasis or arrangement.

LIFE AS ART

Her route to becoming a full-time artist was not, perhaps, as fraught with overwhelming barriers as it is for some. Soukup, drawn to art since childhood and awarded a B.A. in fine art from Colorado State University, didn't "want to do the starving artist thing." She became a graphic designer for a number of years, a stage that she describes as using many of the same skills needed for visual art — color, composition, technique. During this time, following the dictates of a client or supervisor, she also developed a marketing sense, now dovetailing nicely with the sales potential of her Western studies of horses in a variety of sizes and poses. Additionally, graphic design familiarized her with how to be professional in a business setting, self-discipline and structure, an understanding of deadlines. She learned to balance between producing something someone wants to buy and her own self-expression.

Still, financial survival via art alone is rare these days. (As Oscar Wilde said, "When bankers get together for dinner, they discuss art. When artists get together for dinner, they discuss money.") It took a leap of faith and three years for her to transition from graphic designer to full-time artist, a step endorsed by her husband. Soukup has now been at her calling for eight years.

Over that time she has experienced development in herself. She has become highly focused on color, for example, a skill she once thought intuitive, but discovered was not for her. She began to study color theory, experimented with using only three colors and white, manipulated an earthy red or encouraged black to serve as blue, pushed herself in new directions. This simple approach allowed her to focus on color's multiple dualities, such as juxtaposing warm and cool, bright and dull and complementary colors. When she tries new techniques, her level of excitement about her work increases. She now plans several series with common themes, such as horses in different settings and doors and windows.

About two years ago she experienced another major change — motherhood. Even this stage is a study in contrasts. Before having a baby, Soukup single-mindedly concentrated on her work. Time was passing, she felt, and she had none to waste.

Then her son made his appearance, and her life was transformed. In another one of the dichotomies that summarize her,



horse) is the next best thing to having one. You can touch it," she says. She continues to discuss the appeal of the artistic process. To produce depth in a two-dimensional format, she applies various consistencies and amounts of oil medium — a product in which paint is thinned or extended — to create different levels of fluidity, thickness and transparency to the paint. Layers are added, allowed to dry and repainted. She is moving toward sizable pieces, partly because she can use very large brush strokes. Sculpting in clay is a recent interest because there's "something about pushing that clay around."

As for urban landscapes or street-scapes, perhaps her residency in central Denver (she lives near Washington Park) or her trips to large historic cities initiated her interest. Or perhaps the mixture — the comparisons of shadows, angles, colors of buildings, solid and unyielding, yet in their own way organic and ever changing — created the fascination. She now is exploring a wider selection of subjects: nautical and still lifes, perhaps more challenging to market than her specialty horses, yet holding an appeal to a broader audience, too.

She explains the common premise running through all her work: "Thematically, I find myself returning again and again to the juxtaposition between rigid, mechanical, man-made objects and the fluid, organic aspects of nature — dis-

she says the baby has brought freedom. Motherhood seems to have created an additional avenue of creativity for Soukup, an unexpected joy and sense of a different type of fulfillment. Being a parent by no means serves as an excuse to neglect her work. She continues to devote at least three days a week to it — sometimes more, such as when she's preparing for a show. But on other days, her son is the focus. She feels he's generated much in her life, rounded her out as a human in ways visual art does not.

INSPIRATION AND CONTINUATION

Soukup believes hard work accounts for the majority of her results. She draws inspiration from the words of Richard Schmid, educator, painter and author of one of the standard painting books for all realist artists. "Talent, don't bother about whether or not you have it ... It is a complex mixture of motive, curiosity, receptivity, intelligence, sensitivity, good teaching, perseverance, timing, sheer luck, and countless other things ... don't waste time worrying if you are talented." (*Alla Prima: Everything I Know About Painting*, 1998).

Soukup is a guest artist in the Women Artists of the West's (WAOW) exhibition at Saks Galleries from Jan. 31 through Feb. 22. According to WAOW representatives, this show "will continue WAOW's commitment to providing a nationally recognized gallery show to showcase the best work of its members as well as celebrating the art of some of the finest women artists in the country." Saks Galleries, located in the heart of the Cherry Creek shopping district, specializes in 19th- to 21st-century American and European oils, bronzes and watercolors.

Her work also is part of Colorado's esteemed Coors Western Art Exhibit during the National Western Stock Show, Jan. 10–25, 2009, National Western Complex. In Denver, Soukup is represented by Abend Gallery, 2260 E. Colfax. She also shows at the Eisenhower Gallery, Martha's Vineyard; Phoenix Gallery in Park City, Utah; and Timmons Galleries in Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.