

# Urban Patterns

By Bonnie Gangelhoff

Jill Soukup sees the city as a tapestry of colors and shapes



8TH AVENUE WALKWAY, OIL, 16 X 16.

**A**ROUND 6 O'CLOCK in the morning one spring day, Colorado painter Jill Soukup begins her artistic agenda in the usual way with a dose of espresso Americano laced with loads of cream and sugar. A few sips later she is charged and ready to descend into her basement studio, which she affectionately calls "the hole." Once ensconced, Soukup meditates for a few minutes to focus—she is a regular practitioner of yoga—then it's a quick flick of the radio dial to the local classical station for some soothing Vivaldi or Mozart. And so the day begins.

At 35, Soukup (she likes to tell people her name is pronounced "soak up—like a sponge") is a rising star on the art scene. Already well known in the Denver area, she is fast making a name for herself outside Colorado through participation in prestigious events such as the Oil Painters of America show and additional presentations at her galleries, which are sprinkled across the country from Washington state to Massachusetts.

As this story was going to press, Soukup was hard at work preparing for Quang Ho Circle of Artists, a show featuring work by Colorado artist Ho and some of his students, at Denver's Abend Gallery in June. She joined Ron Hicks, Kevin Weckbach, Tiffany Williams, and others in an impressive exhibition that helped reinforce the Mile High City's reputation as an art destination.

Soukup paints a wide variety of subject matter—rural landscapes, city scenes, animals, and interiors.



JILL SOUKUP



FIRE ESCAPE #2, OIL, 40 X 32.

But no matter what the subject, she explains emphatically that her art is always about the "break-down of shapes." In other words, she sees the world as a universe of patterns and designs.

"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," she says. "Intuition and a sense of composition bring these elements together."

**W**HILE SHE PAINTS MANY SUBJECTS, Soukup shows a particular penchant and flair for capturing the urban scene with all of its intricate, mechanical, and architectural features. For example, her 8TH AVENUE WALKWAY depicts a pedestrian path that skirts the edge of a two-lane road. In the piece Soukup leads the eye around the sweeping steel lines of the walkway, which slices dramatically through the painting. On the left side there's a rail yard dotted with trucks that seems to be abandoned. The artist scoped out this Denver scene for a year before capturing it in oils. One day the late-afternoon light seemed perfect, and she snapped an array of photos with her digital

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camera. “The light was great, and I decided it was now or never,” she says.

In *FIRE ESCAPE #2*, Soukup again uses “street furniture,” in this case a steel ladder, as the focal point of her painting. The viewer peeks through the steps of the ladder to the side of a building and the sky in the background. The ladder—like lampposts, pedestrian walkways, signage, and other favorite Soukup elements—helps divide the canvas into various shapes and colors. Likewise, the artist’s *STREETS OF GLASS* spotlights the square windows of skyscrapers to evoke what she calls a plaid design in the fabric of the city.

Some of Soukup’s Denver-based scenes, such as

to any grand manifesto or philosophy, interplays of organic and man-made objects find their way into her more rural scenes as well. In the piece *HORSE POWER*, for instance, a large yellow tractor takes center stage with a group of horses in the background. In one part of the piece the tractor cab forms a frame around the meandering equines.

“The movement between the natural and the structural reflects the way I see and interpret the world as a whole—conceptually, figuratively, and beautifully,” she says. In fact, another major concern for the artist is the concept of what *is* considered beautiful in art. To her it includes good drawing, balance, and movement, and the process of art is about discovering the right

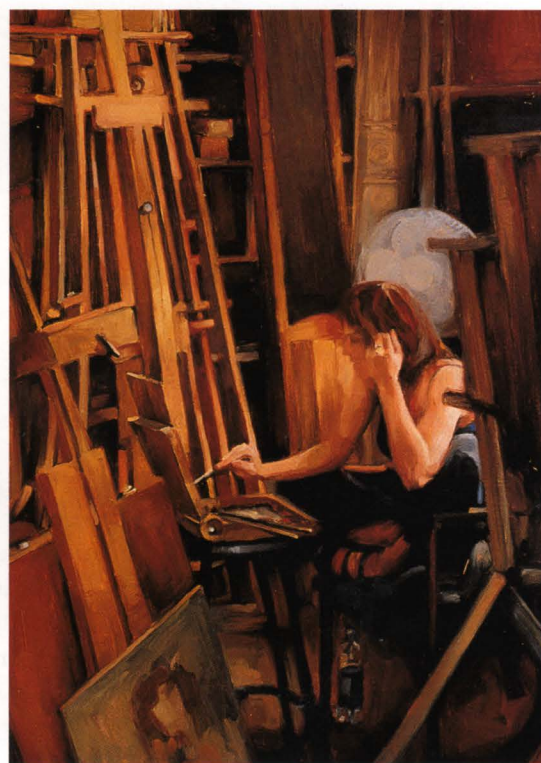


*STREETS OF GLASS*, OIL, 41 X 41.

*16TH STREET LAMPPOSTS*, display another trademark of the artist’s work—the light of the late afternoon sun when it softens the hard edges of the city’s architectural lines. “Colorado has great light when the sun goes low,” she says. “We get sharp shadows and angles. There’s always a warm, soft-filtered color, and I am drawn to that.”

In other paintings Soukup uses a natural element, like the branches of a tree, to create swatches of color that form an urban patchwork quilt—pieces of sky and skyscrapers. “Thematically, I find myself returning again and again to the juxtaposition between rigid, mechanical, man-made objects and the fluid, organic aspects of nature,” she explains.

And though Soukup says she doesn’t work according



*IMMERSED*, OIL, 20 X 14.

combination of these ingredients—her ultimate recipe for beauty, so to speak.

Technically, each of her pieces begins with a decisive moment captured with her digital camera. Soukup then transforms the image on her computer screen by cropping, cutting, and pasting until she reaches the basic composition she wants to portray in her next painting. Next the artist makes a black-and-white sketch on a printout of the image or composes a completely new sketch to refine and connect shapes.

The process helps her loosen up the image yet keep some of the details, Soukup says. She eventually transfers the sketch to a gessoed canvas or board and experiments with color and texture until she finds the right mix.



HORSE POWER, OIL, 24 X 36.

**S**OUKUP KNEW EARLY ON IN LIFE that she wanted to be an artist. Born in Buffalo, NY, she and her family moved to the Denver area when Soukup was 6 months old. Her art education began with hours and hours of imaginative play. She and her brother, Todd, were fond of creating large-scale dinosaur cutouts, life-size ponies made of snow, and various other sculptures created with casting gauze from their parents' veterinary clinic. (Soukup's father was a veterinarian, and her mother helped run the business.) The brother-and-sister team also dabbled in 8 mm films—clay animation projects about monsters and volcanoes.

But when it came to favorite subject matter as a budding painter, her artistic heart belonged to horses. As a youngster she produced countless drawings and studies of equines while developing a talent for capturing their elegant anatomy. During her senior year of high school Soukup started an animal-portrait business, and the school commissioned her to create murals to enliven the environment—her depiction of a mother and baby whale still graces the walls.

In addition to her love of art, academics and sports were also major priorities for the high-schooler. When it came time for college Soukup chose Colorado State University because the school's fine-art program was supplemented by strong coursework in liberal arts—history, psychology, and biology, among other subjects. "I was keen to the fact that athletics and academics fed and often synchronized with my creative work," Soukup says. And she still

believes that her art is enhanced by all of her pursuits, including leisure time spent biking or running outdoors.

After graduating from college, Soukup recalls, her first priority was to achieve a sense of security and financial independence. And thus for more than 10 years she worked contentedly as a graphic designer at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science while taking classes at the Art Students League of Denver, where she studied with Ho, Bill Starke, Dale Chisman, and Mark Daily.

By the time she turned 30 in 1998, however, the graphic-design field was losing its allure for her. That's when she decided to take the plunge into a full-time career in fine art.

Soukup looks back now with no regrets. In the future she hopes to continue refining the fundamentals of good painting with time to explore sculpture and printmaking on the side. Soon she and her husband will move from their small town on the outskirts of Denver into the city proper to take full advantage of all the cultural events there. No doubt the move will influence her work. "My life and my art are inextricably bound," she says. □

**Bonnie Gangelhoff is the senior editor of *Southwest Art*.**

**Soukup is represented by Abend Gallery, Denver, CO; Howard/Mandville Gallery, Kirkland, WA; Phoenix Gallery, Park City, UT; Timmons Galleries, Rancho Santa Fe, CA; and Eisenhauer Gallery, Edgartown, MA, and Block Island, RI.**