

Setting the RIGHT TONE

Penelope Milner puts the darks center stage in her rich, mood-filled figures and cityscapes.

BY NIALL O'NEILL

ENGLISH ARTIST PENELOPE MILNER COMES BY HER LOVE of painting people honestly. She studied fine art in Aberystwyth, University of Wales, where classes included life drawing once a week. The fashionable artistic style among her classmates was that of Frank Auerbach (British, 1931-) and Leon Kossoff (British, 1926-), and the expressionistic school of figurative oil painting and dark, angular, impasto marks.

Milner finds portraiture the most straightforward subject, one that she doesn't have to question. "When you've actually got someone posing for you, and you're painting, you're ideally in a state in which you're not thinking," Milner says. "It's pure concentration, which is the loveliest thing. That's the joy of it—when you're totally focused and concentrating, and the model is just giving."

When Milner paints a portrait, she says that one of the biggest challenges is to avoid having it look like a photo. "With someone sitting, you hope you're getting beyond that and doing something different with it that's honest and genuine," the artist says. "When you see the painting hanging on a wall, it should be a very different feeling."

Summer Street Blues (28x24)





Early Sun (7¼x11)

Frozen Lake
(opposite;
10½x7¾)

Dancing With Pastels

Milner's introduction to pastel was as much a happy accident as that of her friend and fellow pastelist Peter Thomas' (featured in the June 2013 issue of *Pastel Journal*), who lives nearby in France's Lot Valley. Milner had done an oil portrait for a woman whose late husband had been an art teacher, and the widow gifted her a box of 300 French pastels. Milner, trained in oil and watercolor, was unfamiliar with the medium.

But when she began using the pastels, she experienced a revelation. Using the medium

felt easy and natural because of her experience working with charcoals and dark paper, using light tones instead of a putty rubber. She especially was pleased with the direct nature of pastel. "I was used to painting with my fingers, because I've always felt awkward using a painting tool," the artist says. "Pastel eliminated this barrier. The sticks running over the support made me feel like I was dancing."

Although pastel has taken precedence, Milner says her desire to paint in oil and watercolor is still vital. "I'll even paint the same subject in multiple media," she says. "Varying the medium allows me to refresh my approach, to explore the same problem in different fashions and to prevent boredom. I was thinking

recently of having a go at etching again, but I'm not linear. I appreciate those lovely fine lines—they're beautiful—but I just want masses of tone." As a tonal artist, she's always looking for darks—"I tend to think with darks"—and in particular, she protests that there are never enough dark browns.

As for achieving those tones, "I love that it's like a child's trick, making something look three-dimensional," she says. "To create three dimensions by the simple work of value is a fascinating process," Milner continues. "It's enough to paint a path disappearing into a landscape that carries the spectator into a magical and imaginary space. The colors only accentuate this illusion. I scrutinize my subject

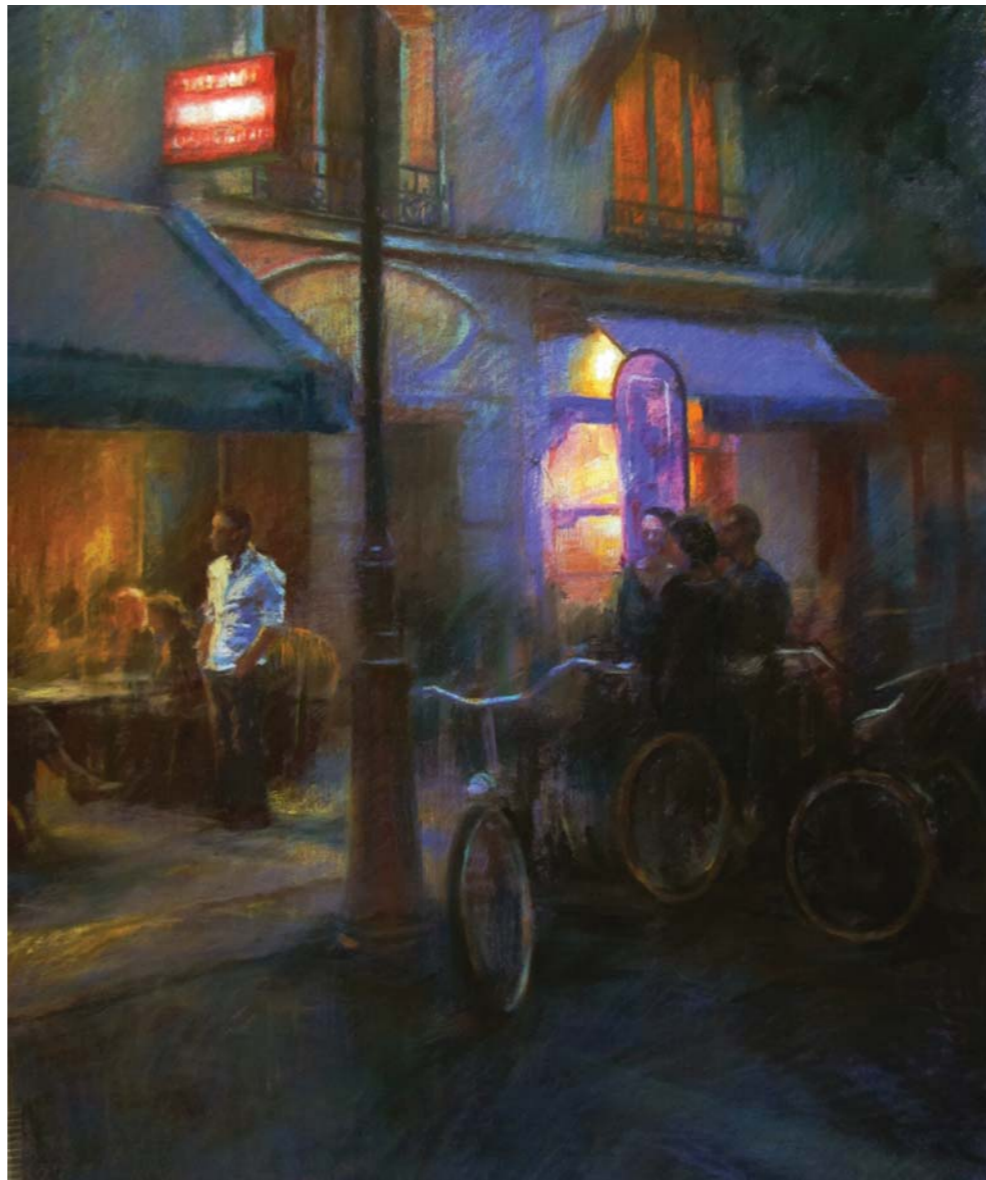
and analyze the hues. The more unexpected they are, such as a green in the face or an orange in the light, the more I exaggerate them. Then, by playing with the complements and opposing cool and warm colors, I make them all work together.

"The color is the vehicle of my sentiments; it translates what I feel," the artist says. "Color isn't, however, as important as light. I've always been more interested in value than in color, and I always clearly separate the two."

Getting the Most From Materials

For Milner, painting is a perpetual exploration of both the medium and subject matter. Her subjects include her children and family, people

CHECK OUT MORE OF PENELOPE MILNER'S TONAL PORTRAITS AND CITYSCAPES AT ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/PENELOPE-MILNER-PASTELS.



Left to right:
Morning Ambiance (10x7½)
Evening at Montmartre (11x7¾)
Silk Robe (15½x10½)

she's met, and scenes in and around London, "with the night lights of the city and the idea of isolation that grips me."

Milner works primarily on Pastelmat as a support, but for large works, she may use hot-pressed watercolor paper or handmade Lotka paper from the Himalayas, which Milner says is soft, supple, resistant and satiny. It also has the advantage of being erasable, which is useful if she begins without a clear idea of where she's heading. It can be fixed lightly when it starts to get saturated, although Milner generally doesn't fix her pastels, as the supports she uses don't really require it.

And she's always ready to experiment. For example, a recent series of small nudes ended up with gouache on top of the pastels.

Milner was quite pleased with the results, but again partly because of the support. "I can abuse it quite a lot, play with it a lot," the artist says. "It might end up going back to the pastel, but it provides possibility."

As for pastel brands, Milner uses Girault, which is manufactured near her home. She also likes larger sticks such as Unison, from the UK, and Artisan Pastellier, from Albi, in the Tarn region of France.

Beyond a Mere Description

On a recent expedition to London, Milner went to see the Rembrandts on display in Kenwood House with a group she was teaching. She attempted to copy one of Rembrandt's late self-portraits in pastel, trying to make the strokes look almost like brushstrokes.

Rembrandt is indeed a clear and visible influence on Milner's work, but she says a broad swath of artists impact her art: "Sargent, I suppose, Degas obviously," she notes. "There are so

many artists I love, such as Gwen John. I like Andrew Wyeth, but every time I look at Wyeth, my work goes to pot. It's like, I want something from him, but I don't quite know what it is. I'd say, with Wyeth, it's not the detail that I'm wanting; it's the drama and the really decisive tones—his ideas, his integrity.

"But as an artist, I'm searching for my own vision, and I don't want to be too disturbed by what everyone else is doing if possible, so I I don't want to be too influenced. I've got more chance of producing something exciting if I stick to my vision.

"When I first came to France, I was amazed by the cliffs of Quercy, especially at Rocamadour," Milner says. "The color contrasts were extraordinary, and my desire to paint them irresistible. It's an emotion on this scale that I wish to convey.

"When I look at a painting by Turner, for example, I imagine what he was feeling when he painted it. I can't believe that it consisted as a mere description of a place. Like music,

painting, in my view, has the power to let us share in these emotions." ■

NIALL O'NEILL is a pastel artist and freelance writer. He's represented by the Lavitt Gallery, in Cork, Ireland.

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Penelope Milner (penelopemilner.net) graduated with a bachelor of arts from Aberystwyth, University of Wales, in 1982. She then spent two years coordinating art exhibitions in a public gallery before returning full-time to her own art. Milner's work has been included in the Royal Academy of Arts and The Pastel Society UK, which awarded her work the Debra Manifold Prize in 2004. She shows and teaches with

the society in Bordeaux and in Feytiat (Limoges) and has had solo shows in Toulouse, Lyons and Paris. In 2013, she was the Invitée d'Honneur at the International Salon de Pastel en Bretagne and in the 2015 Salon de Realisme. She's also a Master Pastelist in la Société des Pastellistes de France. She resides in the Lot Valley, in France.