

THE SEDUCTION OF MARCIE JAN BRONSTEIN'S WATERCOLORS

BY JENNA CROWDER

Marcie Jan Bronstein's watercolor paintings are desirous. They are sensual in their materiality, in the meditative and intuitive application of an atmospheric wash or a crisp glaze on toothed paper, and, especially, in what is left untouched by brush or paint. Bronstein is a responsive artist, guiding her brush across the surface of each painting as a finger traces the contours of a lover's skin. And, as sensitive and clear as Bronstein is in encouraging the work to come forth through her, it is the complement of technical prowess that balances and grounds these works.

Bronstein's paintings are relatively small, rarely exceeding twenty inches in either direction, and always made in serial. She paints on paper, which is sometimes handmade, sometimes mounted on board (and ultimately sealed) in a gesture that allows a viewer a rare, intimate closeness. Since works on paper are so often framed behind glass, these mounted, unframed paintings push the painting toward a viewer like a sculpture, with sides carefully attended to like an oil painting. Her palettes tend toward the vibrancy and contrast of the natural world: the warm, rich browns of leaf litter, the cool blue of winter sky, mushroom red, and lichen colors: gold, sage, lavender gray.

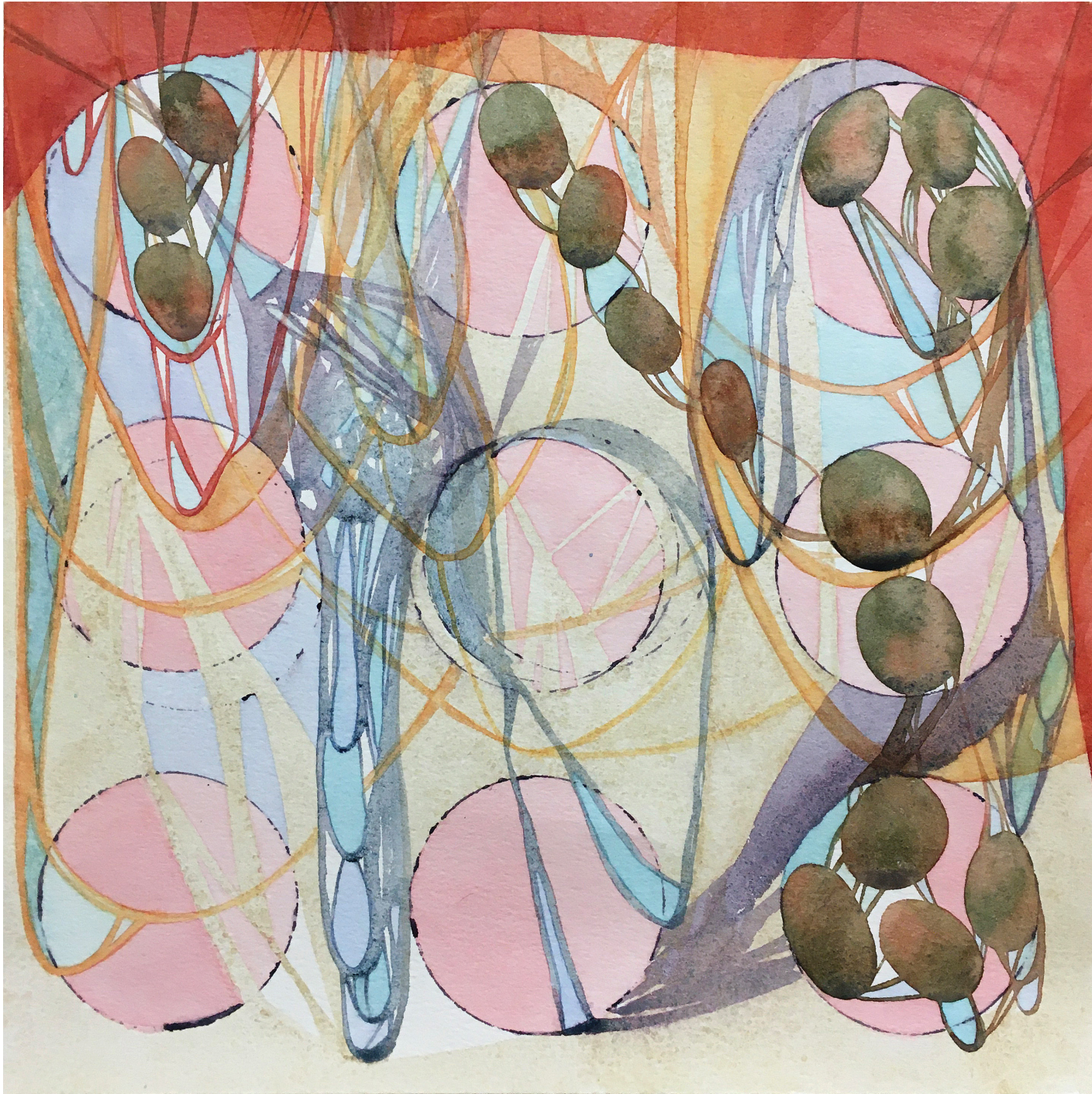
Bronstein describes her paintings as having—being—a record of touch, and one can feel this while looking at the work: how she gently floats the paint across the surface of the paper, waiting patiently for each layer to dry before moving on to the next; how she tilts the paper to accommodate her strokes and the flow of the paint.

During a recent studio visit, Bronstein showed me a photograph taken of her as a young child. In it, she sits, alert, on a couch; her little hands lift a camera to her face, pointing it at a stuffed doll beside her. We can

only imagine what she sees through the lens. This photograph, she says, is a kind of evidence that she has been making images since she was four years old. It's how she understands and navigates the world. In high school, the darkroom was a refuge for her; in college, she moved between drawing, painting and photography, working significantly in portraiture, of friends, herself. Through the process of making 35mm slides of her work, she was captivated by her paintings as transparencies, and, while living in Italy in the early nineties, began a decade-long investigation of painting photographs by hand, using watercolor on wet prints. For several years, Bronstein taught art on cruise ships and cultivated a personal practice of observing the natural world through painting. She has piles of painting sketchbooks and stacks of countless little watercolors, all part of her way of privately engaging with the hundreds of places she journeyed to around the world.

In 2018, at a residency at the Millay Colony for the Arts, she created the series *Seeking, Finding*—watercolor paintings infused with overt mythological sensibility, conjuring sacred caves, cairns, and hand-built stone walls. She created an expansive sense of space within these paintings, beckoning us through layers of veil and tongue and rock. One painting, entitled *The Gift of Summer* (page 30), is a wall of warm stones painted with sedimentary watercolor, stacked and suspended in a coral mortar. A window, near the center top, feels just out of reach and eludes our view. It is technically masterful and incredibly evocative. It's also referential: on the sill of the window rests a perfectly round pearl of stone, a citation of Louisa Chase's 1983 painting *Pink Cave*, featured in the encyclopedic tome *The Book of Symbols* (Taschen, 2010) that Bronstein took with her to Millay. This pebble is one of many careful details that symbolically tethers Bronstein and her work to the cross-pollinating art historical genealogies linked to feminism, mysticism, landscape, and eroticism.

The tension between the seduction of the material itself and the spaces of the untouched white paper in Bronstein's work is perhaps most erotic of all—a keen withholding that stirs the pang of want. These portals



appear in several series, including *Beginner's Mind*, *Oasis*, and *Seeking, Finding*. Elsewhere we find doors, cocoons, and temples—invitations toward shelter or sanctuary.

In his poem "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman writes:

*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead,
nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either,
nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.*

Taking together the transparency, the desire, the sense of built worlds, Bronstein's watercolors do act as records of time, of touch. They describe and model a particular kind of knowing that comes from being in and enveloped by the world, unfettered and alive.

~ Jenna Crowder is a writer, editor and artist living in Portland, Maine. Her writing has appeared in *Art Papers*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Temporary Art Review*, *BURNAWAY* and *The Rib*.