BEING HERE
MARCIE JAN BRONSTEIN
WATERCOLOR PAINTINGS
Introduction
By George Kinghorn, Executive Director & Curator, Zillman Art Museum

As one of its inaugural exhibitions under the Museum’s new name, The Linda G. and Donald N. Zillman Art Museum, we are pleased to present Being Here, which features a stunning selection of recent watercolor compositions by Marcie Jan Bronstein. In this exhibition, Bronstein beautifully harnesses the unique qualities of watercolor, often thought of as an unforgiving medium which doesn’t lend itself to revisionist impulses, in images that are subtle in one instance and bold in another.

A focal point of the exhibition is a dramatic grid of nine works titled Oasis. Marks that suggest ropes or veils of transparent drapery inhabit these works. One may also see subtle references to architecture, such as seemingly stylized stairways and open portals of expansive light. Seen as a unit or as individual panels, the calming monochromatic colors employed in Oasis—ranging from pale blues, lavender, and buttery yellow—invite multiple interpretations from viewers.

In other compositions, Bronstein depicts crystalline forms as if the objects are mutating under a microscope’s lens. One also sees the artist’s weblike strands that reference occurrences at the cellular level or stretched ovoid forms that are reminiscent of polished beach rocks, coral or pill-like capsules. Through her varied marks, blooms of transparent watercolor and enigmatic forms, she creates rich opportunities for reflection and interpretation. It was a pleasure to work closely with Bronstein through the curatorial process on a show that features very recent works created especially for this exhibition. We are delighted to present Being Here as an inaugural show at the Zillman Art Museum.
Too Cool for a Title. 15 x 22 inches. 2018/20

A New Year. 16 x 20 inches. 2019
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.
The Promise of Spring, 6 x 8 inches, 2018/20

Karma, 10 x 14 inches, 2020
Heart. 6 x 8 inches. 2018/20

Family. 9 x 12 inches. 2019/20
Ode to Georgia
12 x 9 inches
2018

Composure
12 x 9 inches
2018
Carrying On
12 x 9 inches
2018

It All Adds Up
20 x 16 inches
2018
Oasis
watercolor on paper on panels
nine 16 x 20 inch paintings
2019
top to bottom, left to right:
That Difficult Day, Late August, Dusk
Early Morning, Tomorrow, Birthday
Early Evening, Dawn, 4 am
Early Morning

Early Evening
Beginner’s Mind
watercolor on handmade Khadi paper
11.75 x 8.25 inch paintings
2019 – ongoing series
I Have Seen The Spectre

Metamorphosis

Naked

The Fourth Dimension
“I paint intimacy, vulnerability, fragility and interdependence. I paint relationships... those we have with others, and those we have with ourselves.” MJB

Marcie Jan Bronstein is a visual artist whose work stands on three decades of dedication to hand-painted photo-based art and meditative practices. Her interest is in using the special qualities inherent to watercolor (bleeding, flowing, layering) to create intimate, sensual paintings that reflect an inner world: Symbolic, emotional, diaristic and psychological. Titles are an integral, carefully considered part of the work.

All paintings are created without a sketch, a plan, or a mark of pencil on the paper. Images are discovered and composed completely in the moment, and with watercolor, this means that each mark made has a degree of finality. As with Asian brush painting, mindfulness and an open heart are key.

A graduate of The Fashion Institute of Technology and Hampshire College, her work has been exhibited, published, and commissioned for thirty years. Bronstein is the author of three books and the creator of a number of large-scale public works. From 2014-18, she traveled the world teaching creative watercolor painting to hundreds of passengers on ships. In 2018, her work was selected for the Biennial at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, and she was awarded a residency at the Millay Colony of the Arts. A number of the paintings in this catalog were created during that month at Millay.

Since 1996, she has lived and worked in a reconstructed barn, with her family, on the coast of Maine.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2020  Zillman Art Museum, University of Maine: “Being Here” (solo), Bangor, ME
2018  Center for Maine Contemporary Art Biennial (juried), Rockland, ME
2017  The Annex Art Center (invitational), Castine, ME
2014  Photographic Resource Center: Flash Forward Festival (invitational), Boston, MA
2013  New England Photography Biennial (invitational), Framingham, MA
2012  Aarhus Gallery: “Infinite Horizons” (invitational), Belfast, ME
2009  Maine Museum of Photographic Art: 50 Photographic Artists, Falmouth, ME
2007  Center for Maine Contemporary Art: “Altered Nature” (invitational), Rockport, ME
2006  Blum Gallery, College of the Atlantic: “Portrait/Self Portrait” (juried), Bar Harbor, ME
2005  Center for Maine Contemporary Art: “Winter in Maine” (juried), Rockport, ME
2004  Elements Gallery: gallery artist, Rockland, ME
1999  Elements Gallery “The Doll Series” (solo), Rockland, ME
1997  The Frankfurt Airport: “First Designer’s Avenue” (invitational), Frankfurt, Germany
1997  Creative Photographic Arts Center: “Photographs 1992-1997” (solo), Lewiston, ME
1997  A.I.R. Gallery: “Generations” (invitational), New York, NY
1996  Sylvia White Gallery: “The Horse Show” (juried), Los Angeles, CA
Danforth Gallery: “Visions of the Mind” (juried), Portland, ME
1995  Gallery 2/20: “Work in Progress” (invitational), New York, NY
1993  Nuova Libreria Galileo & Studio Poletto (solo), Mestre, Italy
1994  Galleria Il Diaframma/Kodak Cultura: “Foto Colorate” (5 person), Milan, Italy
1992  Artemare 1992: “L’uomo e il Mare” (juried), Riposto, Italy
1990  UC Medical Center (solo), San Francisco, CA
1987  Hampshire College (solo), Amherst, MA

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS
2019  ArtMaze Contemporary Art: featured artist, Summer, Issue 13
2018  Your Impossible Voice Literary Journal: cover painting, Winter Issue
2017  Portland Press Herald: feature article, Portland, ME
Yale University, Perch Arts & Literary Journal: featured paintings, New Haven, CT
New England Review: cover painting, Middlebury, VT
Maine Home and Design: “Maine Artists To Watch,” Portland, ME
Princeton Art Brushes: Artist Spotlight
2016  Art Revealed Magazine: portfolio and interview, London, UK
2015  After The Pause Poetry Journal: cover & portfolio of paintings
2008  The Maine Sunday Telegram: featured author, Portland, ME
2003  Non Satis Scire: Hampshire College Magazine: cover + portfolio, Amherst, MA
2001  Object Lessons: Beauty and Meaning in Art, Madison, WI
1997  The Maine Sunday Telegram: review of solo exhibition, Portland, ME

1994  Creativity: “And then there was NON...”, New York, NY
1993  Il Gazzetino: “Un’ americana che dipinge le foto” (review), Venice, Italy
Il Gazzetino: Musica & fotografia (review), Mestre, Italy
Progresso Fotografico (portfolio), Milan, Italy
1992  La Nazione (feature), Florence, Italy

PUBLIC ART / COMMISSIONS / GRANTS
2005  Bellevue Hospital: 250 photographs for new hospital wing, New York, NY
2005  Maine Arts Commission: Good Idea Grant, printed portfolio of works
2004  Public Percent-for-Art Program: 30’ x 15’ installation, Stevens School, Belfast, ME
2002  Public Percent-for-Art Program: 24 works, Family Crisis Center, Denver, CO
1994  Saks Fifth Avenue: art selected for all Fifth Avenue windows, New York, NY
1990  Neiman Marcus: art selected for Union Square windows, San Francisco, CA

RESIDENCIES / WORKSHOPS
2018  Millay Colony of the Arts (Full Fellowship), Austerlitz, NY
1986  Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY
1985  Vermont Studio School, Johnson, VT

EDUCATION
1992  Lorenzo de Medici: Diploma Magister Linguae: Italian language, Florence, Italy
1988  Hampshire College: BFA, Amherst, MA
1986  Fashion Institute of Technology: AAS, Magna Cum Laude, New York, NY
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