

## Jane Norling's Art

In 2000, following years of vibrant participation in a number of different pictorial movements, San Francisco Bay Area artist Jane Norling leapt into new territory. Her paintings invited us to experience an ease with subject and materials in service to themselves, and thus in service to the only reality there is: the sole objective of all good art being its rendering as art.

Pablo Picasso said "**Art is the lie that tells the truth.**" Perhaps a more accurate reference to Jane's work would be: great art erases fictitious barriers between what we are coerced into perceiving as reality and what we would be able to see and feel if we could free ourselves of that coercion. She takes us to planes between planes, spaces where reality cannot be twisted, magic happens, and pasts and futures are remembered in or superimposed upon the present. We view her paintings and understanding comes with the all-of-a-piece experience great art provides.

Writers write about art because artists can't or don't want to. This is particularly true of painters; the newer installation artists seem to be more verbally articulate. But for most painters the painting itself is the statement. Why over-explain or limit a work of art by speaking about it when the piece itself, if successful, should be enough? Jane Norling's paintings are powerful statements on their own. I have long felt the desire to write about them.

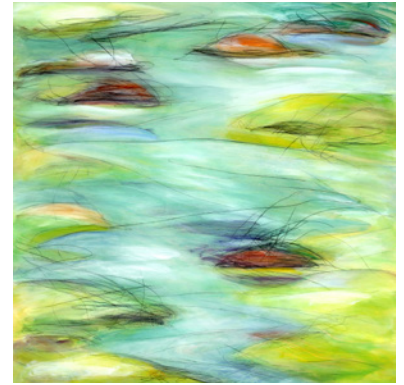
Perhaps this desire comes most forcefully from conversations Jane and I have had about her art over the decades through which I have witnessed its development. Whether learning poster techniques in Cuba (where we met) in 1972, working on some of the great Bay Area murals throughout the 1970s and 80s, focusing on portraiture or moving back into abstraction and finally out into her more recent and breathtaking landscapes, she has periodically felt nudged by questions about intent and resolution. These are a citizen's questions; the work itself steadfastly refuses to stumble over such concerns.

Jane studied art at Bennington College back at the time when abstraction was the most original contribution U.S. American artists were making to world art. She came to San Francisco in 1970, where she joined activists working to end war and build collective, art-filled communities. There she became active in the Bay Area mural movement, the publishing/print collective Peoples Press, and community and city arts organizations, all supported by the rich cultural mix that was then and still is San Francisco.

During the early years of Jane's career, she was strongly influenced by the great Mexican muralists and by Cuban poster art. Some of her abstractions and the more abstract areas in her figurative paintings are still among those works of hers that move me most. And she is a master portrait painter, capturing gesture and personality in ways that bring her subjects to life. We not only recognize the person in the painting; we discover nuances about their physicality and emotional makeup unnoticed before we have seen the portrait.

Jane is someone who has never stopped studying the array of techniques available to contemporary drafts people and painters, from oil paints, acrylics, pastels, resins, waxes and graphite to the digital possibilities that continue to entice us. Painting is her life, and although she has kept a graphic design studio going, her deepest connection and most electrifying artistic statements come from the hours she spends in her Oakland studio.

I have often told Jane she needn't worry about her art making a specific narrative point. And then told her this again each time her questions and doubts surface in our conversations.



Painters speak with brushstroke, color and movement. They project their multidimensional vision on a flat surface, most often contained within a rectangle or square. Just as a poet uses language, a musician speaks through sound, a teacher passes on knowledge and encourages curiosity, a healer cares for those in need, or a gardener enjoys the intimate satisfaction he or she may receive by designing an environment in peaceful counterpoint to the madness that surrounds us, a successful visual artist creates a moment of transformation through paint or some other medium. We do not simply contemplate a picture, but are seduced by its many entrance points, bringing with us our own diverse histories. A great painting meets us more than halfway; it changes us.



Jane's recent work is about land and water in the most profound and overarching ways. Preparation begins in her own contact with a place; familiarity births discovery. Her vision is large: the reshaping power of water and wind as they carve canyons through millennia, great movements of tectonic plates, glaciers and ice fields receding before the onslaught of global warming, what is left when fire consumes old growth trees and earth's covering must begin again. Her painting process builds through a variety of mediums to create luminous, almost translucent surfaces, marked by line drawing that reflects her sense of light, armature and shape out in the field. Paint follows the gesture of drawing like those on great journeys follow their internal maps.



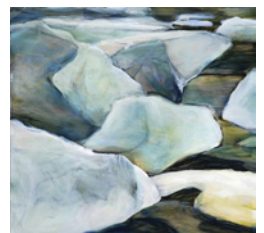
**Colorado** explores the terrible promise of disrupted land and water. In this painting Jane's signature black lines have become thick, a dominant element on the canvas. She also scrapes into the paint, leaving white lines that bind and release pieces of the image. Reds, oranges, purples and ochres dominate, but slivers of lavenders, blues and greens surface as well. In the foreground white-capped waves rise and dance. This place is alive, on fire, begging us to do something to preserve its magnificence.

In **Glacier Spieg 1** the shapes of a threatened natural world are both brilliantly literal and abstracted back into themselves, reiterating what might have been preserved and what is undeniably lost. Reflection of land in water moves in interlocking triangular shapes: dark and almost foreboding on the painting's left, luminous on its right. Here Jane's black lines are thin and broken, sometimes painted and repainted again to produce a texture that gives the work exceptional depth. To my mind, this is one of the most exciting among Jane's many powerful images.

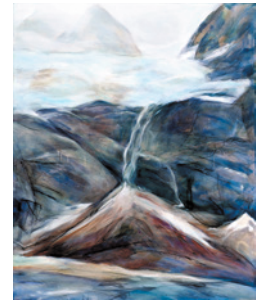
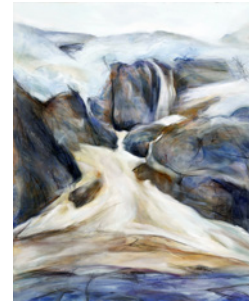


Jane's way of working and reworking the surfaces of her paintings reproduces a sense of familiarity with her subjects. Volume and fracture, luminosity and depth play off each other as they do in dreams—or when we give up subterfuge and allow ourselves to see.

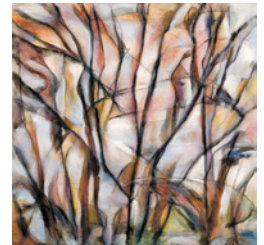
**Water Level 6/Icebergs** and **Coming Or Going** are two of the artist's most recent works in this ongoing series dealing with water and ice. In them she asks difficult questions in paint. These paintings work on myriad levels: as perfect abstraction, figurative exploration, and a third plane that takes shape when these elements mesh. The picture planes fragment almost to the point of a jigsaw puzzle of separate shapes, yet there is a strong feeling of unity in both. The result is movement, earth's power, arcing from one place to another, from a moment in which a turning point is possible to one beyond salvation.



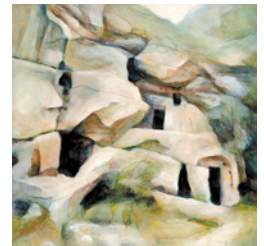
***Southwestern Glacier*** is a diptych in which the viewer is pulled into the paintings by an unrecognizable force. This may be said of many of Jane's canvases. But in this duo the experience is more immediate, more violent without resorting to any device beyond the artist's mastery of space and movement. Cloud cover, ice flow, rock and sea engulf us. Perspective is expertly handled. Deep ice and snow-capped mountains, the vertical flow of water over rock, and the rush of glaciers into the sea, all combine to place us precisely where the artist needs us to be. We literally feel the immense power of that wall of ice, approaching and receding in terrifying premonition.



***Burned Earth What Next*** crackles with the intensity of fire, its destructive force laced with the strange beauty of what remains. Again, those thin black lines create a dance of movement, but here they dissolve into the thicker black of what remains of trees: stark and resolute. At the bottom of the canvass whispers of green remind us of what lived. Painted and repainted areas of white function as connective tissue, almost as negative space in their ability to hold the overall image together. In this as in almost all her paintings, there is a working and reworking of shape and color that mirrors seasonality, weather, multiple cycles of birth, aging, death and the possibility of rebirth.



Jane traveled to Turkey in 2008 to explore the carved rock homes of Cappadocia, resulting in her series "**Cappadocia Ex/Interiors.**" ***Mountain Home Soganli*** depicts the mysterious coming together of human artifice and soft stone landscape. These paintings have a very different feel from those in which natural forces have been the only agents of change. Jane is as skilled at evoking the ways in which land has been shaped and modified by humans as when the power of nature is responsible.



***Red is the Answer to Everything*** breaks my heart. There is no other way to say it. The depth of feeling and movement in this painting lifts it above even those many others that are so extraordinarily powerful. If Jane continues to wonder, from time to time, what her art has to do with how she sees the world and its dilemmas, this work offers the only possible answer: everything.

These paintings evoke the broadest and deepest forces at work in our world: tectonic movement, earth's magma breaching its fragile surface, melting ice caps, oceans threatening to devour whole nations, rivers rising above their banks, reduced animal habitats, climate change, brutal fear and tenuous hope; and how the forces of nature, particularly when tampered with, threaten all life. As message they are definitive. As works of art they are gorgeous and vivid: seducing us with their originality and power.

Jane Norling's art expresses her concepts of justice—social, environmental, preservation of life on earth—brought forward from earlier figurative work (murals, posters, portraits, illustrations) to something deeper and more inclusive. She has found this something deeper and more inclusive via the abstraction in nature and years of looking and learning to transmit in paint what she has learned to see. This recent work is about foundation, the very architecture of life on earth. Most importantly, it is art that is not **about**, but **is**.



**Margaret Randall**  
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