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PAINTING UP A STORM

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Painting Up a
STORM

Iva Morris uses layering, texturing, mark-making and direct handling to summon the breadth and scale of the Southwest's meteorological events.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

HM



Taos Gorge
(24x36)

On previous
pages:

Reckoning (38x40)

THE VAST SKIES AND SPACIOUS TERRAIN OF NEW MEXICO provide a spectacular stage on which to witness the forces of nature in action. Massing clouds, dust devils, thunderstorms and tornadoes play out gargantuan dramas under the intense Southwestern light. The desert, mountains, gorges and mesas beneath reveal more slow-moving natural processes of rock formation, erosion and plant growth. These settings and the forces they reveal form the subject matter of artist Iva Morris.

The Power of Pastel

By working in pastel on a large scale, Morris orchestrates celestial events and terrestrial vistas that evoke the wonder and mystery of the natural world. Instead of just rendering what she sees, though, Morris uses the medium to take on the qualities of the elements she paints. Thinned layers pushed by hand make veils of

light in the sky, while rounded strokes in soft pastel adopt the appearance of clouds. Likewise, vegetation and rocks assume sharper edges from harder pastels.

Given that she's such a masterful handler of pastel, it's surprising to learn that Morris only took up the medium after she left art school. After college, she worked various jobs—adobe building, furniture making, teaching, waitressing. "I also worked as a sponger in a lithography shop and made prints," she says. "I became allergic, though, to some of the chemicals—mainly solvents—and wasn't able to make paintings or prints for several years." In 1988, she launched a hand-painted pull toy and furniture business using nontoxic paints and finishes.

So what finally drew her to pastel? "My mother-in-law gave me a huge set of 1930s-era Girault pastels that had belonged to her father," she says. "And then, while exhibiting at the Southwest Arts and Crafts Fair in Albuquerque, N.M., I signed up for a pastel class with Deborah Secor. I figured that painting in pastel was something I could do without poking the

SEE SOME OF IVA MORRIS' LESS TEMPESTUOUS LANDSCAPES AT [ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/IVA-MORRIS-PASTEL-LANDSCAPES](https://www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/pastel/iva-morris-pastel-landscapes).



'chemical bear.' I immediately loved the process. I'd always worked in layers and thought about color and surface that way, thanks to my years in printmaking. I found that pastels were the perfect medium with which to continue this exploration."

Morris also appreciated the immediacy of pastels, and relished the ability to complete a work within two to four days; in comparison, her oil paintings could take months to complete. "I've experimented with all sorts of combinations of media and layering when working on my pastels," she says. She likes to work out problems in pastel, sometimes using that information to paint in other media.

Reining in Stormy Weather

Living in the Southwest inspired Morris to take on the landscape and weather events around her. "New Mexico has some amazing skies—dramatic, huge storms in monsoon season, spectacular sunsets," she says. "I sort of graduated from painting sunsets and dramatic cloud formations to outright storms."

She found that the transitory conditions of sky and clouds required the use of photography for reference. Because some of the more dramatic occurrences she paints can be difficult and even dangerous to investigate, Morris also studies storm images from the National Weather Service.

Prairie Spiral
(42x32)



Lyle's Sunset
(24x36)

To observe many of the tamer weather events she paints, Morris just has to step into her backyard. "I live in a farming community with huge mesas that provide a platform for several mountain ranges—the Manzanos, Los Pinos and the Magdelenas—on the east and west horizons," she says. "I work outside a lot, so watching a big storm come in is fascinating. I began to take photographs of dust devils and the approaching storms about 10 years ago. I made a lot of sketches and began adding a variety of media to the surface to capture the visual phenomena of storms," she says.

"Pastel really lends itself to the re-creation of atmospheric effects: sheets of rain, mist, fog and clouds," Morris continues. "I think the chance to play with materials is one reason

why I like to create storm scenes so much. They give me an opportunity to combine different painting techniques and to discover new ways to use the materials."

Painting Prep

Morris prefers working on sanded pastel paper, usually Wallis, but says she has also made her own mix using different weighted grits, marble dust and matte medium on Masonite. Because she works large, she dry-mounts the paper onto Gator Board for extra support.

Next, she makes a colored ground on the paper using a mixture of pastel and mineral spirits. "When creating the ground, I try to choose a medium value and a color that's prevalent throughout the scene," she says. "I mix a



LESSONS FROM MAKING MESSES

Morris grew up in western Maryland and remembers a childhood of great creativity. “I always enjoyed making paintings and drawings,” she recalls. “My mother called these works my ‘messes.’ We lived next to the Chesapeake Bay until I was 12, and I remember digging up clay and taking it home to make things. All of the neighborhood kids would get together and build forts in the woods near the bay, make clay pots, sew costumes and have plays. We caught turtles and frogs, collected bird nests, and would sit and draw them with crayons. Back then, nothing was organized by adults; these were just things that we did in the summer or on the weekends.

“My mother went to a local bingo parlor most evenings. She bought all of us kids little paint-by-number sets at the five-and-dime store to work on while there. I truly learned how to paint from these. I still paint and do pastel in little bits of broken color.”

A summer art camp in high school left Morris determined to be an artist. In part, she attributes that drive to her family background. “Most of the women in my family were creative,” she says, “making quilts, rugs and needlework. In fact, our entire community was one big classroom. Someone was always showing you how to crochet, graft trees, piece quilts or make bread. I think project-based learning is the best way to learn as a child, and the experience fosters a lifelong curiosity and respect for learning.”

color that will provide visual unity for painting. Sometimes I’ll vary the ground, creating bands of different colors to underlie different sections of the picture plane.”

Once the ground is dry, Morris makes a sketch of her subject using a No. 2 pencil. She goes over the pencil sketch with gouache to make a value study. She often works up to a fairly full rendering of the subject, albeit in limited color, generally working with just three colors of gouache: sepia, dark violet and magenta. The artist may use watercolor or block in the basic shapes with pastel and Turpenoid.

One of the advantages of the underpainting is that it allows for the planning of composition, tonal structure and balance. This affords more direct, less labored handling in the upper layers.

When it comes to the actual layering of pastel, the artist’s approach is perhaps a little unusual. “I start with a layer of soft pastel,” she says, “a Terry Ludwig or a Unison, and then finish up with Girault and some pastel pencils. I sometimes use water or Turpenoid to set the softer pastel. Using a Girault or the pencil to glaze over the surface and knock off some of the media buildup will expose some of the transparent layers underneath.” Morris notes that water or Turpenoid mixed with pastel makes it adhere strongly to the surface. Colors pulled over the top of it won’t disturb it too much, so little mixing will take place, ensuring that both layers remain vivid.

Morris’ paintings often feature significant variation in the depth of the film; skies are

ADVENTURES IN TEXTURE

When it comes to her storm scenes, Morris takes her underpainting a step further by adding texture. "I sometimes build a relief using marble dust, matte medium and gesso," she says, "or I may combine alcohol and graphite powder for the value study. I use the reticulation that mixing these two materials provides. [Reticulation is the uneven patterning that sometimes occurs when two substances are mixed and left to dry on a surface.] This preparation provides a matrix of texture for the storm effects."

Morris' adventures in texture have led her to try all manner of materials, such as gouache with Turpenoid and watercolor. And, "I've experimented with pearlescent powders, carbon grit and neon Silly Sand," she adds. "The important thing is to think about the surface as a sort of topographical map that will receive pastel."



- A) Underpainting: mixed media
- B) Underpainting: gouache and Turpenoid with pastel ground
- C) Underpainting: watercolor



pushed on in thin layers with the side of the hand while other elements are built to heavy surfaces. If things go awry in an area, Morris blows the pastel off the surface using a jet of air provided by a compressor she keeps in the studio; canned air also does the trick.

As the artist builds her pastel, she keeps a lively dialogue with her reference photography but doesn't attempt to reproduce it. Instead, she uses her pastel layers creatively to remake the structure and the feel of tornadoes or storms,

adjusting color and values along the way to give her work strength, clarity and pictorial unity.

Weather Phenomena

The success of Morris' painting methods can be seen in *Taos Gorge* (on page 30), in which a vast landscape recedes into the distance where storm clouds drop sheets of rain on one side of the composition. In the middle distance, the gorge itself cuts into the land, giving us a sense of the monumental scale of the landscape.



South 60 (26x36)

There's variation in handling between the vegetation in the foreground and the soft airiness of the distant clouds. Unity is aided by the red ground that lies beneath the painting and the lively mark-making throughout. Given the richness and energy of the surface, it's not surprising to learn that one of Morris' influences is Willem de Kooning (Dutch American, 1904-1997). "I just adore his surfaces," she says.

A more dramatic work is *Reckoning* (on pages 28 and 29), in which a huge tornado

whirls across an open plain, tearing into the expansive desert floor. On the right, the sky has turned a lurid green. "That really happens in these storm conditions," says the artist. "You can sometimes see an almost Day-Glo green in the clouds."

Other paintings take on an almost religious feel as they convey a sense of power and scale that dwarfs most human enterprise, as in *South 60* (above). Here the flash of lightning gives the painting an almost otherworldly feel.



Dust Devil (60x49)

A similar effect of near symmetry is on view in *Dust Devil* (above), in which the swirling cloud of air and dust dominates the center of the composition. The relative lack of detail gives the painting a semi-abstract quality, as though it has a life apart from any sort of real-world reference.

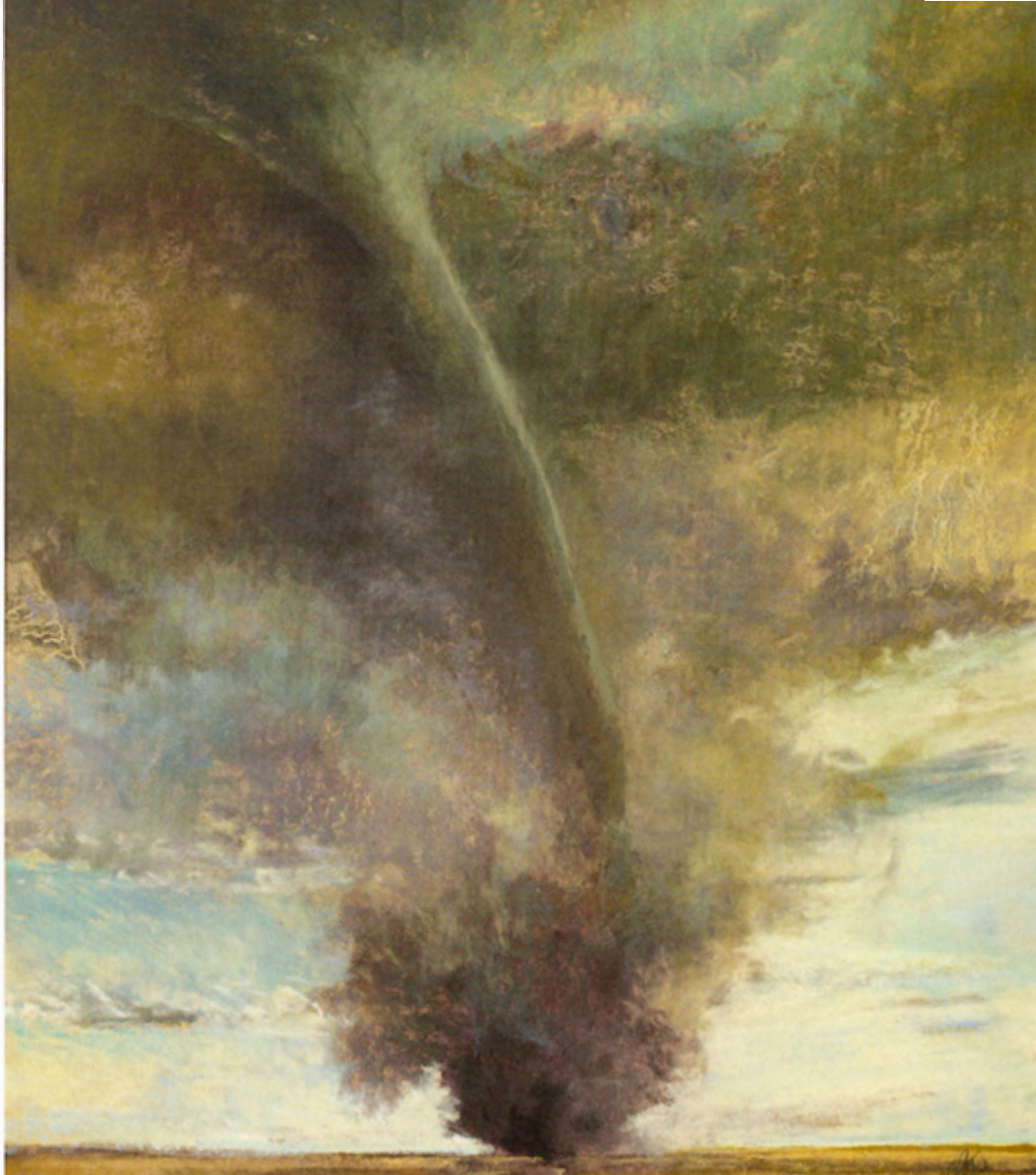
In other works, the power of light takes on a more dominant role, as in *Lyle's Sunset* (on page 32). A low sunset has found its way beneath an enormous violet storm cloud so that the sky is awash in oranges and yellows. "I used a yellow

ground for this one," says Morris, "so the pastel isn't really built up that much."

A Creative Transfusion

Clearly, Morris is inspired by her surroundings in New Mexico, but she also draws strength from her work as an art teacher at all grade levels.

"I can truly say that I've never had a student tell me that he didn't want to paint something, make something, build something, or just play and make a mess with materials," she says. "The enthusiasm and fearlessness that kids bring to



Dorothy Weather
(42x38)

the art table are so inspiring. Children attack paper and canvas and clay and just about anything else you throw at them. I love it.”

The artist recalls a Saturday morning art program for preschoolers in which enthusiasm and fearlessness were obvious. “We made monoprints using paint, sponge rollers and long sheets of rolled-out paper on the floor,” she says. “One little girl inked herself up from head to toe and rolled down the paper! She said that she wanted to ‘make a print of herself.’ I’d like to retain this degree of imagination and spirit in my art. Teaching has been a great way to receive a creative transfusion when needed. Keeping up with my students has required me to remain curious and to experiment with all sorts of media and art forms.”

Drawing creative motivation from her students and artistic inspiration from the soul-stirring Southwestern landscape, it’s no surprise

that Morris thinks of this Andrew Wyeth quote to sum up her own work: “Art is nothing more than the people that you love and the place where you live.” ■

JOHN A. PARKS (johnaparks.com) is an artist and the author of the book, *Universal Principles of Art: 100 Key Concepts for Understanding, Analyzing and Practicing Art* (Rockport Publishers, 2014).



Iva Morris (ivamorris.com) graduated from the University of New Mexico with a degree in art education and received a master’s degree in humanities at Frostburg State University. She worked as an artist for 22 years, traveling the country to exhibit at art fairs and events, and developed a collector base. Today, she teaches middle school art while maintaining a considerable output as a painter. Morris is a member of the Pastel Society of New Mexico. She and her husband, painter Brian O’Connor, live in the small farming community of Las Nutrias, N.M. Her work is represented by McLarry Fine Art, in Santa Fe, N.M.