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The Lay of the Land

Rhode Island plein-air artist Nancy Friese captures the nuances of dreamy landscapes near and far.

✿ Nancy Friese's landscapes are more than snapshots of inspiring locations. She uses the term "composite" to describe her technique: a blending of her feelings, interpretations, and memories of a place. A self-described perceptual landscape artist, the Providence-based painter, drawer, and longtime faculty member of the Rhode Island School of Design works outdoors in what she calls an open-ended fashion over multiple sessions—sometimes taking a month, or even up to a couple of years—to gather the sum of her experiences into one piece. "I truly believe all landscapes are a composite," Friese says, "unless you're just copying a photograph. It's the power of light, the power of place. The longer you're out of doors looking at a site, the more color is revealed."

Friese's talent spans mediums, from oil (on linen or canvas) to watercolor to etchings, each uniquely expressive. Oils, she says, are more physical. There's

substance and texture to the paint, so you can touch the piece and feel the body of the work. Watercolors represent light and spirit; when you close your eyes and run your hand over the paper, the surface feels the same whether it's painted or not. Having studied printmaking and painting at Yale University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Art Academy of Cincinnati, Friese is, she says, "devoted to two dimensions and the virtual world that limitation can

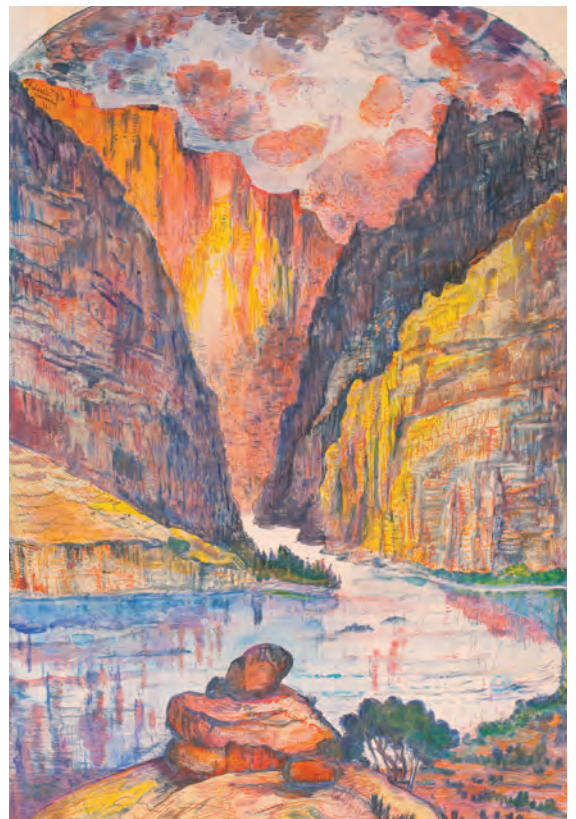
ABOVE: *Spring Arbor* (2017), diptych, oil on linen, 48"H × 96"W. **BELOW:** *August Trees* (2015), diptych, watercolor on paper mounted on board, 40"H × 119"W.



| BY JULIE DUGDALE |

Artistry

“WHEN I’M OUT THERE PAINTING, PEOPLE ALWAYS STOP TO TALK TO ME, BECAUSE WHEN DO YOU EVER SEE AN ARTIST *DOING* ART?”



create. For me, the drawing, painting, and printmaking feed seamlessly upon each other and give me avenues of focus.”

As a plein-air artist, Friese works all over the world, from Japan to the countryside of Europe to her farmstead in North Dakota—where she has spent twenty summers being inspired by the skies and open spaces. Passers-by in more well-trodden locations are often curious about her process. “When I’m out there painting, people always stop to talk to me, because when do you ever see an artist *doing* art?”

Her process begins with color. “I get rid of the

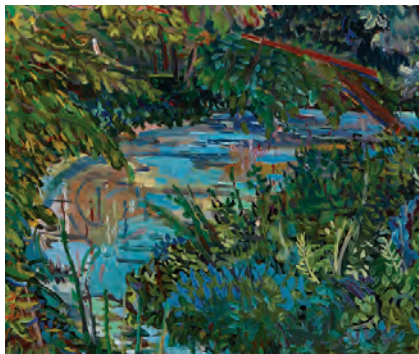
white ground and establish colors, from lights to darks, in the first rounds. I try not to bring in any lines in the beginning.”

The image emerges in subsequent layers of color-assigning and detailing over continued visits to the location. “It’s very mechanical, in a way,” the artist says.

It may be habitual, but her artistic process isn’t without challenges. The biggest? Finding that perfect combination of the representative and the abstract. “How can you walk that line?” Friese asks. “And can others see that? How do you remain structured yet free? That balance creates dynamic, or animated, spaces.”

Pieces from her 2017 *Arbor Views* exhibition, with titles such as *Summer Noon* and *Along the Stream*,

BELOW: *Along the Stream* (2014–2017), oil on canvas, 30"H × 30"W. **FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** *Rim of Sunlight and Trees* (2016–2017), diptych, oil on canvas, 50"H × 100"W; *Avondale Farm Preserve* (2007), oil on linen, 30"H × 30"W; *After Thomas Moran Gate of Lodore* (2011), color monotype, 22"H × 15"W; *Way to the Sea* (2012), watercolor on paper, 41"H × 41"W.



perfectly capture that edge with deliberate, yet seemingly spontaneous, colors and textures. It's a "collection of views of trees and their places in our daily lives," she says. "They stand beside us throughout each day, and stand for us in a way."

Friese's work has been featured in more than 30 solo shows and 170 group exhibitions around the world, and is sought after by institutions, museums, and private collectors. She also shares space with some of the most distinguished artists in New England on the top floor of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, where a 144-inch three-panel work she painted in Japan is on display.

Although Friese concentrates almost solely on nature these days, she's no stranger to harder lines and edges. She painted for a residency program on the ninety-first floor of the North Tower in New York City, but lost all her cityscapes on 9/11. She was then commissioned to do a triptych of cityscapes capturing the skyline without the World Trade Center. Since then, she has turned almost exclusively to landscapes. "The longevity of a landscape is that it's a philosophical space—one the viewer fills," she says. "I like to think it's eternal that people still love to stand in nature and be part of it. I love it if I'm alone at a site. No music, no other media. It's really enjoyable to solve your own creative problems. You have your own little realm, but in the end it's all for somebody else to see." ■■■

EDITOR'S NOTE: Nancy Friese is represented by Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, cadetompkins.com. To see more of her work, visit nancyfriese.com.



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