

Drawn to the

West

Denise LaRue Mahlke's
serene, meditative pastels
express a spiritual connection
to nature.

BY TAMERA LENZ MUENTE

Vermilion Morning (15Hx16)



WHEN LOOKING AT DENISE LARUE MAHLKE'S PASTEL PAINTINGS, it's easy to understand how she feels about the western landscape. Whether she's painting a sparkling clear stream, distant blue mountains, towering red cliffs or a rocky geyser basin, Mahlke is sharing her spiritual connection to nature. "The emotional response to a scene is what makes me stop and take notice," says Mahlke. "Whether I'm outdoors or looking through digital images on my computer screen, it's that heart response—triggered by the light, color or mood—that inspires me." There's a meditative quietness in her work. Soft edges, subtle shifts of value and light, and carefully designed minimal compositions help create this mood.

The Ephemeral and the Sublime

A Texas native, Mahlke enjoyed her first experiences working en plein air with pastels near Corpus Christi, where she painted Gulf Coast back bays, marsh grasses and big skies. Because Texas is vast, it offers a diverse range of landscape. Mahlke gravitated toward the stark beauty of the hill country in west central Texas. It was there, at a clear river running over rock, that she found the subject matter for *Living Waters* (opposite, bottom). The viewpoint is directly above the water's surface, making the viewer feel as if she's

hovering over the river. Without a horizon to orient the composition, the focus is on the water and the forms around and within it. We see the reflective surface, with movement illustrated by foam where the water meets the rock and by ripples in the foreground. But we also get a sense of stillness, as shadows and forms emerge from the bottom of the river through the clear water.

"I feel like this is the first piece in which I was successful in achieving the ethereal effect I sought," says Mahlke. "*Living Waters* was a benchmark for me. I spent a lot of time sitting back and contemplating it before it was finished." She also visited the location often to do studies and experience the scene, a process that has become important to her as a landscape painter. "I don't consider myself an expert plein air painter," she says. "I think I do my best work in the studio, but it's necessary to be out there experiencing the place."

These direct experiences come through in her paintings of scenes from the Mountain West, such as *Near to High Places* (above), a view from the Beartooth Highway, which runs through Montana and Wyoming to Yellowstone National Park. Though a relatively small pastel, it captures the monumentality of a sublime mountain landscape. The viewer is perched on a precarious edge covered with the lingering snow of the season.

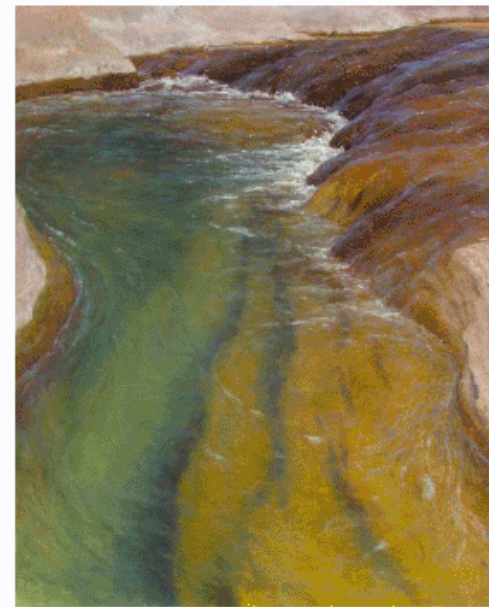


Clockwise from opposite:
Near to High Places (18x24)
Connectivity (36x48)
Living Waters (30x24)

"I like to spend time just looking and observing. That's as important in learning how to see as is actually painting."

Although we can't see over the cliff, we can tell it's a long way down. The simple form of the white snow in the foreground contrasts with the detailed rendering of the rugged cliff face, and the hazy blue of the distant mountain creates a sense of vast space. Mahlke remembers getting out of her car at the location, the cold wind whipping. "It wasn't a good place to stop and paint," she recalls, "but I spent a lot of time there anyway, just taking it in. I like to spend time just looking and observing. That's as important in learning how to see as is actually painting."

While many of Mahlke's pastels capture the grand vistas of the West, some zero in on more unusual aspects of the landscape, such as *Connectivity* (above), where she trains her eye on the otherworldly thermal pools of the West Thumb Geyser Basin in Yellowstone. "I





Excelsior Geyser, Yellowstone Park (1873; watercolor and pencil on paper, 12½x9½) by Thomas Moran

ARTISTS IN THE WEST

Denise LaRue Mahlke is one of a long line of artists enamored with the American West. As westward expansion began in the 19th century, artists documented the frontier for Americans in the East. German-born artist Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) enjoyed great success with his paintings of the Rocky Mountains and Yosemite Valley. In 1859, Bierstadt joined a survey party formed to improve land routes to the West. Created in his studio from sketches done on his journeys into the frontier, his paintings were often idealized depictions of the frontier as a promised land.

In the early 1870s, Thomas Moran (American; 1837-1926) participated in an expedition to survey the Yellowstone region. The first color images of Yellowstone to be seen in the East, Moran's paintings played an important role in the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. He returned almost annually, creating hundreds of depictions of the region during the last 25 years of his life.

With the rise of Modernism, later artists would find inspiration in the dramatic forms of the Western landscape. The stark landscape of red rocks, mesas and stunning desert plains remained a principal focus in the art of Georgia O'Keeffe (American; 1887-1986) for almost 40 years.

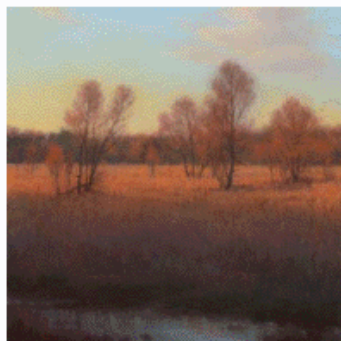
Today's painters of the West range from those who depict geographic details to those who use the landscape as an expressive, emotive or formal vehicle. "The spiritual connection I feel to the landscape continually draws me," says Mahlke.



Evening Shift (20½x20)

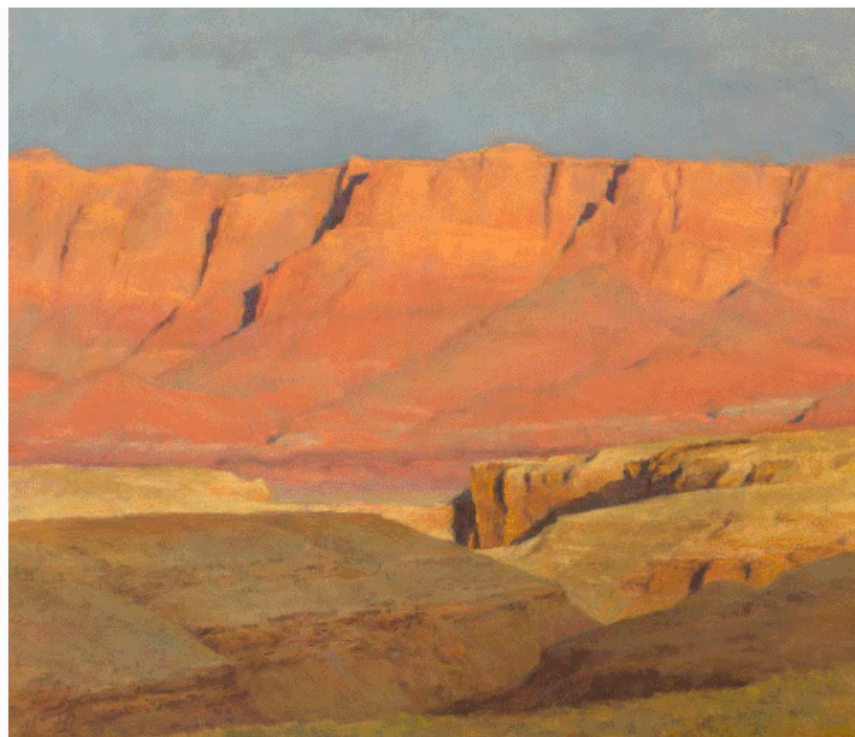


Morning Song (12x12)



Rest (12x12)

Beyond Badger Creek (opposite; 10½x12)



was totally taken with the pools," she says. "The color and clarity were so beautiful, I could have stayed for hours just gazing into them." Volcanic activity there generates extreme heat, forming mineral deposits that make the surface appear almost moon-like. Bacteria that can survive intense temperatures form vibrant colors in the water, from emerald greens to turquoise blues. In the piece, her largest pastel to date, Mahlke emphasized the rainbow colors of the water and carefully conveyed the subtle range of grays that surrounds the pools. "I like the abstract qualities of the pools," she says. "For me, the more abstract and simplified compositions lend themselves to a larger size."

Mahlke also enjoys looking at work by other artists, both past and present, for guidance. "It's amazing to see the many interpretations of Yellowstone and its pools, for instance, by other artists. I like to see how they've handled painting these challenging subjects, like the steam coming off the water," she says. The artist has just completed a second pastel of the geyser pools, and plans to return when the crowds are thinner to spend more time painting the pools from life.

Outdoor Marvels

The vastness, vibrant color and solitude of the desert Southwest also inspire Mahlke. She has visited northern Arizona and southern Utah almost annually for the past decade. *Vermilion Morning* (on pages 46 and 47) is one of many views she has done in Vermilion Cliffs National Monument, a place she says she could visit every year for the rest of her life and never tire of. "The first time I was there, I realized there are so many artists who live in Utah and have painted those red rocks for many years. I felt like a real novice," she recalls. "You have to get up and out around 5 a.m. to catch the sunrise, and my friend and I were driving and stopping every 50 yards or so, marveling at the light. Suddenly an artist pulled up beside us and yelled out, 'Don't stop yet—keep going. You're going to miss it!'" Mahlke and her friend continued driving, and up around a bend saw a splendid view of the sun hitting the red cliffs. "It's just magical," she says.

EXPLORE MORE OF THE ARTIST'S MESMERIZING PASTEL LANDSCAPES AT WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/MAHLKE-PASTEL-LANDSCAPES.



The artist employs photography as a tool to help her accurately capture these fleeting times of day, when the light shifts literally every minute.

Though she does take advantage of photography, painting from life is an important aspect of Mahlke's studio work. "Painting directly from life is how we learn to see the value, color and subtle nuances of nature that aren't always present in a photograph," she says. "You can then apply what you've discovered by observing nature, and use the photos as a jumping-off point in the studio."

For plein air sessions, she always keeps small sheets of sanded paper mounted on Gatorboard, a sketchbook with pencils, a French easel and two boxes of pastels at the ready. One box is full of hard pastels for blocking in large shapes, and a larger box contains a variety of soft pastels. Outdoors, she sometimes starts from the center of interest and moves outward. "If the values are right in the underpainting, I can leave the secondary areas of the painting alone and have enough information to use the painting as a reference."

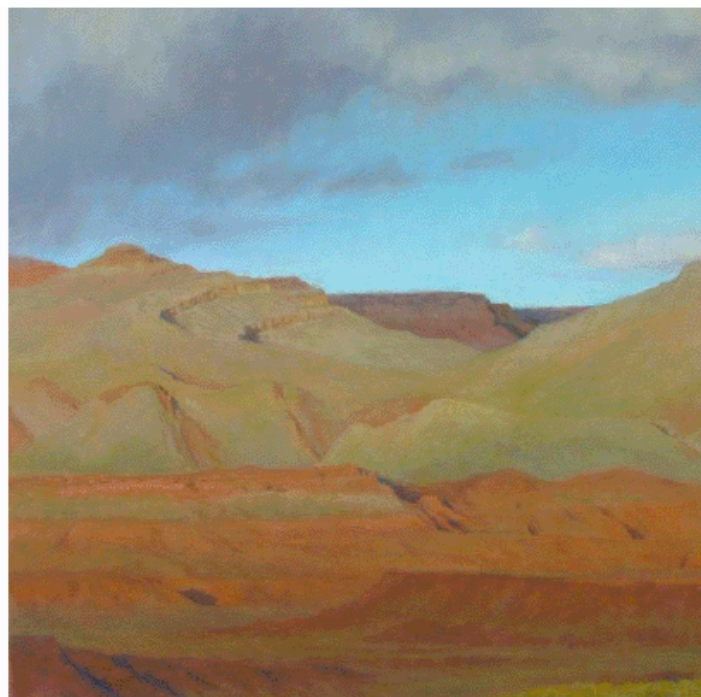
Back in her studio, Mahlke uses digital photographs on her computer monitor as visual references, but before starting the painting she usually makes several thumbnail sketches in graphite, pen or charcoal to help her decide what

to include in the composition, where to locate the horizon line and how to arrange the values. Notes taken in the field help her clarify her vision for the painting. "Through thoughtful manipulation, editing and design of the scene, I continually ask myself, what was it that made me want to paint this? Why? How can I best express it?"

Poetic Color

"Subtle color and value shifts can make your work poetic," says Mahlke. Many of her paintings possess a harmonious color scheme that reinforces the quiet, contemplative mood she relishes. "I consider the dominant value and color of the painting before starting, and I play with different color schemes and the use of complementary colors by doing small color studies or color notes with pastel, watercolor or oil paint." After determining the dominant color of the composition, she uses an analogous color wheel to try out different color combinations. "Like my thumbnail sketches, these act as a road map if I get off track." Another way to maintain the harmonious color scheme, says the artist, is to block in the underpainting in the same analogous color family.

"Keying the sky is very important," she adds, "since it's the main light source." Sometimes she



QUICK TIP
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Rhapsody
(opposite; 24x36)
Tapestry
(11½x11½)

allows the paper to add luminosity to the sky rather than blocking it in with pastel. "This works especially well with white Wallis pastel paper." She also finds that the buff tone of UART works well with the predominant blues of skies and clouds. When she does put down an initial color for the sky, she pays close attention to value. "I do this especially for twilight or daybreak, when the light sets the mood for the painting."

"Color is relative," says Mahlke. Rather than using particularly vibrant pastel colors, she generates vivid color by placing particular colors next to, or layering them on top of, other colors. For example, in a work like *Tapestry* (above), Mahlke juxtaposes warm oranges and reds with cool greens and blues, which emphasizes the qualities of each pigment and color temperature. "One of the best techniques for a beginning pastel artist is to work with limited colors," she says. "When I started out, I didn't have hundreds of pastels. Like most beginning pastel artists, I had to buy a limited number and gradually build my palette. These limitations force you to combine and layer colors and to pay more attention to value. It really does teach you how to come up with answers to problems using limited means. All those incredibly saturated pastels are tempting, and you just

want to try them all, but limiting your palette can make you a better painter."

Mahlke has learned to see these subtle color combinations by closely observing nature. But for her, working outdoors isn't just a learning process. "It's important to paint outdoors regularly, to gather information and to sharpen observational skills, but also just to enjoy God's wonderful creation. It's all part of the process. It feeds the soul." ■

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Texas artist **Denise LaRue Mahlke** (www.dlaruemahlke.com) finds sanctuary as soon as she steps foot outdoors to capture nature's grandeur in pastel. A signature member of the Pastel Society of America, a master signature member of American Women Artists and an out-of-state-artist member of the California Art Club, the artist has received national recognition for her pastels, and she exhibits her work regularly. Her paintings are represented at InSight Gallery in Fredericksburg, Tex.; Thunderbird Foundation in Mt. Carmel, Utah; Principle Gallery in Charleston, S.C.; Biltmore Galleries in Scottsdale, Ariz.; and Chamberlain Fine Art in Barrington, R.I.