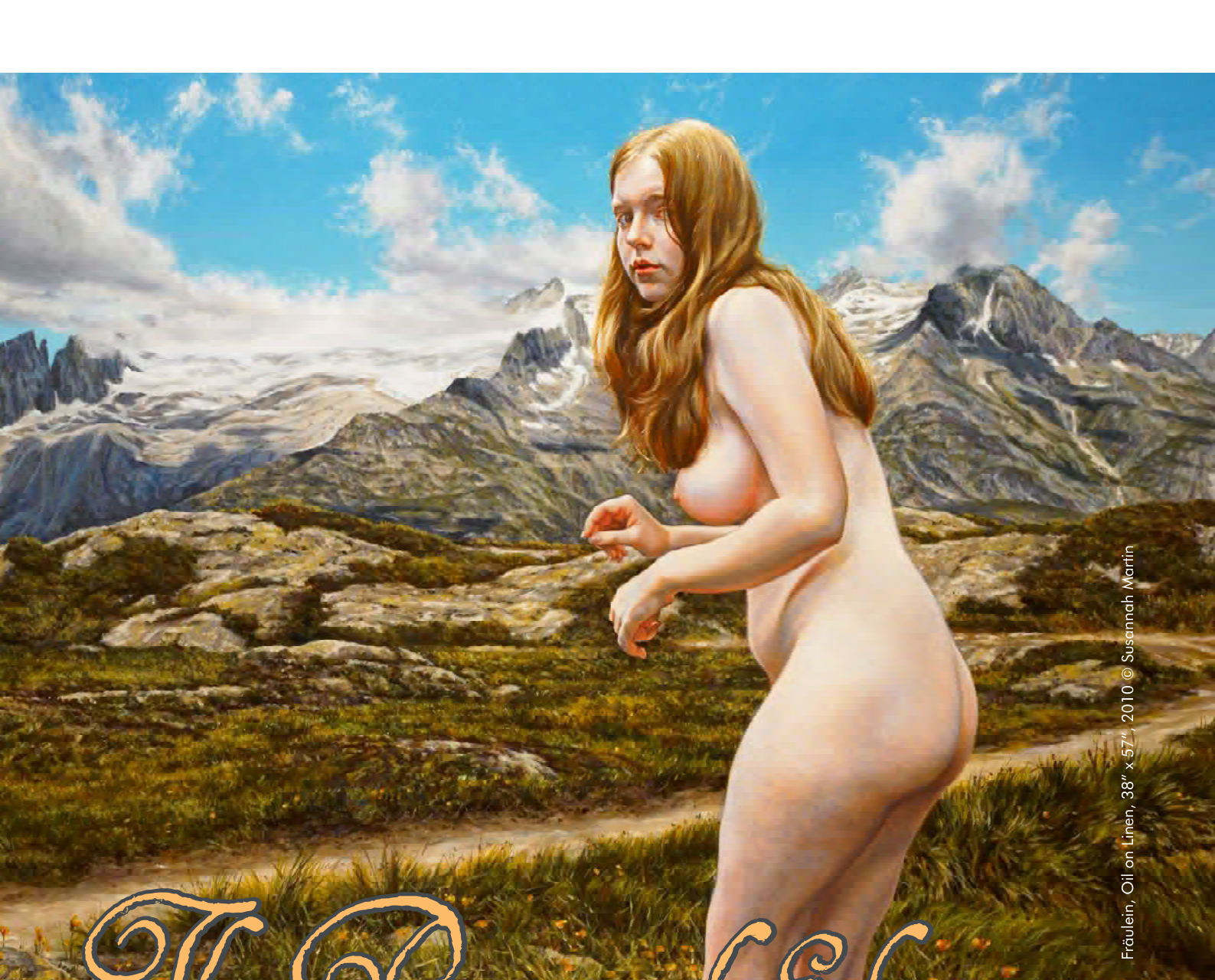


Amazon, Acrylic on Paper, 42" x 30", 2011 © Susannah Martin



Fräulein, Oil on Linen, 38" x 57", 2010 © Susannah Martin

The Power of Elements

an interview with
Susannah Martin

by Lana Gentry

Trickling cold streams, shifting rocks, and mossy carpets offer a path into the painted forests of Susannah Martin. Bare bodies stand noble and innocent among nature's offerings as they fill the lungs with a breath of purity. Taking them in becomes a near religious experience that is crisp and understood. Adults, children, and animals are positioned in the natural world in ways that remind us that they are not meant for exploitation. They simply are what each of us was meant to be.

LG: Your skill level is incredible, but your subject matter really grabs the viewer immediately. At what point in your development as an artist did you make the decision to include nudity in the work? Was there always an interest in painting the nude?

SM: During and shortly after art school at New York University, I was painting figure and landscape. Back then the people were clothed. I showed a bit in New York, but financial necessity pulled me away from the art world and towards the world of scenic and mural painting. I earned my living this way for over twenty years. With the set and mural painting I was required to paint just about everything, except for people! This is ultimately why I began to paint commissioned portraits, to get back to the figure. One thing that I always found disturbing about portraiture is how important clothes and accessories are to people, as if their identity were dependent upon them. I always wished I could just blend the issues of social position or status out and get more to the essential character of the person. That's when I decided that I needed to paint some nudes. Just for myself at first. However I discovered quickly that the nude was very fertile soil for me.



C-Section, Oil on Linen, 48" x 72", 2009 © Susannah Martin



George, Oil on Linen, 51" x 51", 2011 © Susannah Martin

LG: When I see your work, the utopian aspect of your expression, puts me in the mind of religious brochures. Despite the fact that the exposed aspect of the work plays against this notion, there is something in the style that feels nearly religious in nature. Do you understand that observation from my view or have you previously heard any similar feedback?

SM: That is a very interesting point, and no, no one has dared to ask me about it yet. Spirituality is always a slippery slope to talk about, but I'll try. From my point of view, the one aspect does not oppose the other. The body is the house of the soul. Most religions have something to say against anything that soils or degrades the house of the soul and in some religions this very positive concept has been turned into a denial of the body itself. I don't buy that. The body itself can only be beautiful and sacred. It is our behavior towards our bodies and the bodies of others which can be ugly, hateful, or destructive. My "style" of painting is in fact a form of deep meditation on people and nature, on the substance and meaning of life. My process is not dissimilar to icon painting where hand follows mind and mind follows reverence. That is probably why it feels religious to you. Painting is an act of love.



Shepherd, Oil on Linen, 65" x 100", 2012 © Susannah Martin



LG: I would imagine that aside from the fact that your work contains a real innocence and a return to nature, that there are people who misunderstand your intentions and form of expression. Do you hear from these people and if so what are the misunderstandings about your work?

SM: It probably is exactly this perceived contradiction in my work, the naughty and the nice, which confuses people. The great majority of people who see it are afraid to open their mouths and say anything. Some people are appalled, and I have been censored a few times. The most absurd censorship was when someone reported a video which my gallery produced of my solo show opening. There were images of people walking and looking at my paintings hanging on the walls. The video was removed from YouTube which was a real loss for me. Most people like to look, but it is a rare person who is not afraid to hang it on their wall. One comment that I have heard often is "beautiful painting, but I would never hang a naked person on my wall." I have even heard, and this from the curator of a major art institution, "I would never hang a picture of a person on my wall, unless it was of myself". I don't know what to even say to that, it is pure narcissism and hatred of humanity! But that is not uncommon these days. I think that the greater problem is that my paintings are very confrontational and require the viewer to work with them. I prefer artwork which requires significant input from the viewer and I avoid heavy narration for this reason. A work of art, in my opinion, should be a dialogue, not a monologue. I don't want to tell people what to think, I want them to think and find the meaning within themselves. Sometimes I think that many people are just lazy when it comes to art. They want to have a clear, easily digestible story which they can interpret in the usual 3.2 seconds and move on. A true art lover, however, enjoys a challenge and wants to be forced to pull new and interesting observations out of their subconscious. It is a process of self-discovery. These are the people who love my work and I am thankful to hear from them often. They usually are not afraid to talk about it.

LG: Your human subjects are often found in natural scenarios. Tell me about your connection to nature, versus say a living room or city as a backdrop for these beautifully rendered subjects.

SM: That is exactly the point where I want to challenge how the figure is classically portrayed. That is completely anthropocentric. As a general rule, the nude throughout art history is portrayed against a soft focus, washed out or darkened background in order to draw the attention exclusively to the figure. The message is clear, all that matters is we are humans. I would like the landscape to be as important as the figure and so emphasize unity of life and our interdependence with and upon nature. By removing the peoples clothing and by taking them out of their homes, away from all of their possessions, I am attempting to turn the focus away from having and toward the essential meaning and joy in life. So I suppose that I am painting the enlightenment in humanity that I hope is to come..

Descent, Pastell on Paper, 39" x 26", 2012 © Susannah Martin





Gatherers, Oil on Linen, 44" x 76", 2010 © Susannah Martin

LG: Your work is realistic, but still very painterly. Since I have never seen anything exactly like what you do, I have to ask what kind of influences, be they organic or human, would you credit in the development of this unique style?

SM: Basically, we are all influenced by every experience we have ever had in our lives, so it is impossible to name them all. But probably the most significant ones were first of all my parents who were both artists (my mother still is). I learned a great deal technically as well as general knowledge of art history simply by watching them. And of course, it is important to remember that so much of what we do is an act of rebellion against our parents, so that element is definitely a part of my work. However, the fact that I paint people makes me 100% my mother's child. I have had some great teachers along the way. My most important teacher at NYU was John Kacere, the photo-realist butt painter. He taught me more about how to think about painting than actual technique. NYU also has a fantastic art history department, and I sucked up as much as I could there. Most of my technical skill came through the years I spent as a muralist and scenic artist and portrait artist. My commissions have been so varied that I have been required to paint just about everything at least once and usually on a tight deadline. This forces you to think fast and learn by doing. I consult all the great masters constantly in my library, among those whom I look at and admire the most are: Van Eyck, Van Dyck, Rubens, Memling, Holbein, and Vermeer to name a few. As far as landscape painting is concerned, I developed an early fascination with the Hudson River School painters which has never left me. Sometimes I think, all I really want to do is put naked people in Albert Bierstadt paintings!



An Agreement, Oil on Linen, 18" x 22", 2013 © Susannah Martin



River, Pastel on Paper, 47" x 28", 2009 © Susannah Martin

LG: I generally like to ask women who partake in the more edgy expressions of art if they think that being female exacerbates a sense of shock as it relates to their work. In other words, are nude works considered less shocking in your view when they are presented by male artists?

SM: I have heard some women refer to my work as sexist, which is ironic. For these women I'm sure that the shock is greater. I am not sure if the men who are shocked by the nudes are any more shocked by mine than a male artist. I often run into confusion from the viewer mostly because I think they are not used to seeing the nude from the female perspective. The reality of the female gaze is still a reality that many do not want to accept. Women look at the body in a different way than men do, generally speaking; of course there are exceptions. I find that generally the male gaze is very goal oriented. I think it is often difficult for many men to look at a nude without subjecting it to the same criteria that they would a potential sexual partner, that is often the reaction I hear; this is appealing, this is not - if it is not appetizing, why should I look at it? More difficult is trying to show the male nude. Women enjoy looking, but are shy about it due to the heavy double standard of judgment on female sexuality, so they tend to avoid it. Gay men do not have a problem with looking, but generally have a much different aesthetic. Straight men often have a real problem with the male nude and are easily offended.

Crossing, Oil on Linen, 56" x 116", 2010 © Susannah Martin







Morning Swim, Oil on Linen, 14" x 32", 2012 © Susannah Martin

LG: One of the things that really grabs me about your work is that you choose subjects on all types and shapes. You are not an artist who is merely chasing one particular type of nude based on physical attraction or specific aesthetics. I think real people appreciate it a great deal. Is that intentional or just natural and unconscious?

SM: Thank you for noticing, Lana. Anytime that you paint a person, the image can function in two different ways as an archetype of all humans or as the representation of an individual. I want my people to function as both. For this reason I never generalize the features of my people. They are real people whom I know and care about and who have generously offered to model for me. I take great care and joy in painting them exactly as I see them so that a clear likeness results and their characters can be felt. For me, the paintings begin with the people and my experiences with them outside in the landscape. The models play a very strong role in what occurs and what is expressed.

LG: Would you say that you spend as much time in nature as your painted subjects?

SM: I am happiest outside exploring nature. That has always been the case. I would like to spend more time traveling and taking in new landscapes but the painting part is very time consuming. I am also in the process of raising a daughter with my husband, which commands a great deal of my attention. I get out there as much as possible and look forward to spending more time exploring a bit later in life. I feel very lucky to be able to spend some time each year in the USA, the home of the most amazing landscape in the world, and to also have Switzerland next door so to speak, where I live in Europe. The landscapes in my paintings are all places that I visited and photographed personally.

LG: When you paint water, viewers sometimes report a real sense of actually feeling the water. Is painting water in your view more challenging than other scenes, and if so, why?

SM: I don't know that water is any more challenging than say trees, it's all mind blowingly difficult really. Sometimes it comes easily, sometimes I feel like an idiot. I am glad to hear though that it feels real to the viewer. That is exactly what I am after, not so much a photographic realism of what nature looks like, but more importantly what it feels like to us. It is the sensual experience of nature that I am trying to convey.

LG: Tell us about your current or planned projects and what we can hope to look for from you in the future.

SM: This last year has been largely a year for executing commissioned pieces that I had kept waiting while working on my last solo show. I am in the final phase of a large nude portrait commission right now which is a huge challenge, as portraits always are!! This is the first nude portrait commission I have ever had. Maybe it will start a trend, that would be interesting! When I am finished with this, I will get back to expanding the nude in landscape theme working with two new models who I photographed this summer. This will be the first couple that I have worked with, a man and a woman, which obviously opens up new exciting possibilities! Can't wait to get at it...

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