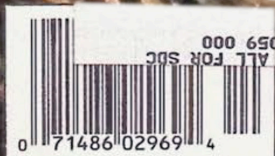


# AMERICAN ARTIST

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**Painting On Location  
In The Southwest**

**Reviving Techniques  
Of The Past**



COVER BY CHUCK FORSMAN

# Janet Alling's Passionate Eye

BY BOB STONE

*This New York artist is both a romantic and a realist.  
By manipulating scale, playing with the relation of figure to ground,  
and using dramatic color, her flower paintings not only examine  
the limits of the real world but also invoke an exciting new one.*





Above: *Autumn*, 1984-1987, oil, 72 x 66. All artwork this article collection the artist.

Opposite page: *The Conductor*, 1987-1988, oil, 48 x 72.

“I’m a devoted flower painter,” Janet Alling says of her work. But although she places herself squarely within that category, she also revolutionizes the genre. Flowers are often considered last in the traditional hierarchy of subject matter (after figures and landscapes), but Alling not only places them first, she advances realist painting in the process. Her pictorial statements about flowers—their environments, their moods, and their colors—are, perhaps above all, highly charged revelations of the act of seeing.

Alling’s love of nature has a depth possible only for a city dweller. She located her studio on Broadway near Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan twenty-one years ago, and her situation typifies the fact that after artists move into a neighborhood, everyone else wants to follow. Now, amidst the shopping mecca for the leather-and-spiked-hair set, she rises above the sheer volume of street life. Twelve floors up is her sun-filled loft—an enormous living and working room full of books and plants and a broad range of her large, luminous canvases. From her perch, Alling, a tall, cheerful woman who emanates the same presence you sense in her flowers, contemplates the vast sky that appears in her work.

Remembering the oil paints her father gave her at age ten, Alling says she



*Apocalypse*, 1985, oil, 57 x 68.

has always been an artist. But it was during her training in art history as an undergraduate at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, that she was moved by the works of Degas, Manet, and Monet to take up painting seriously. The New Realist movement, which gathered force in the 1960s, later won her allegiance. This movement was energized by the generation of artists trained at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where Alling got her M.F.A. degree in painting in 1964, when realists Chuck Close, Janet Fish, and Harriet Shorr were also there. "It was Monet who especially set my imagination going," she says. "I didn't want to imitate him, but I wanted to work in the same spirit

and to make the kind of major statements he and other Impressionists did. I was thrown in with others at Yale who had similar ambitions." She has since had five solo shows in New York City-area galleries, but, even with a sixth in preparation, she supports her art by working in the textile-conservation department at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Alling places her own type of realism in a distinctly American tradition that goes back to Thomas Eakins, but she says that while Eakins worked out of a "very constricted and controlled philosophy," her work focuses on the act of seeing itself and the feelings it liberates. The ambiguity of seeing—that it discloses both what's actual and what's

possible—is pushed to extremes in Alling's work. The viewer gets what is but also what might be. Her begonias, coleii, petunias, geraniums, lobelias, tulips, and gladioli are immediately recognizable. But in developing these recognitions, Alling inserts twists that also allow viewers to see vast new possibilities.

**B**rutally manipulating scale, she presents her larger-than-life flowers close up. Species-identifying cues are thrust at the viewer in shadowless, uniform light free of any modeling. A botanist might find her selection of details incomplete or even ugly, yet it summons up the flowers' total presence. The viewer



*Storm Approaching*, 1986-1987, oil, 66 x 72.

has the uncanny sense of being before admirable people rather than mere plants.

A distinctive play with the relation of figure to ground pervades most of Alling's work, in both her large, mature oils of the 1980s, such as *Grouping*, *Storm Approaching*, *Autumn*, and *Apocalypse*, and her seemingly lighthearted and incidental watercolors. She often employs elements of portraiture that radically disconnect the figure from its setting to better reveal its character. For example, Italian Renaissance portrait paintings depict a figure against a distant background with no visually coherent mediation between the two. Alling's "portraiture" does the same for flowers (as in her painting

*Autumn*), bringing them out of the background where they usually reside. This effect automatically indicates a deep space beyond the surface and, as a result, a fictional world.

Laws of perspective are invoked by the use of figure-ground relationships; however, exaggerating the disjunction between figure and ground simultaneously frustrates these laws. When the viewer cannot see the relation between the two, he or she is forced to imagine another space, perhaps a kind of dream space, in which the absent link between figure and ground is supplied. This disjunction seems to suggest the vastness of the domain over which Alling's flowers cast their personal influence, an effect similar to the function of the

background of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Commercial portrait photographers employ related devices: bland, seemingly distant grounds for figures whose presence is enhanced by close-up focusing of long lenses.

**B**ut Alling goes several steps farther than photographic portraitists. For one thing, her backgrounds are anything but bland. A typical Alling background can span a seemingly infinite space with regular strips of vividly colored clouds, which, whether or not they have been perceived by her, are accurate representations that capture a particular mood. The contrasting, Fauve-like tones of the flow-



*Sunset With Rolling Clouds, 1984-1987, oil, 60 x 72.*

ers deepen this mood. Her paintings fairly burst with theatrical meaning, as seen, for instance, in Hopper's *Nighthawks*. Standing before paintings such as *The Conductor*, the viewer can't help but imagine strong personal relationships between the individuals, as if a history-making scene is in progress or is about to be. You might even say that certain of Alling's paintings have the drama of Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Socrates* except that the characters are flowers. Her images are all the more evocative because they don't express a known narrative.

Alling's play with figure-ground relationships also breaks with the realist tradition. In many of her flower paintings, the point where the stem meets the ground is never shown. Again, this seems somewhat reminiscent of *Mona Lisa*, in which

the viewer sees only a vague wooden ledge and a distant, vast landscape behind the portrait; all other elements that might join the figure and ground—a chair, her room, nearby trees—are excluded. Alling's oils of the 1980s, such as *Apocalypse*, make use of this disjunction. Although we always see her flowers from certain angles, we don't see the ground, nor do we see other signals that would join the viewers to them or to actual space. Yet, clearly, these flowers are rooted somewhere; they are presented as real and vibrantly alive.

This kind of paradox is especially true of her begonias, whose implausible patterns are rendered as entirely natural. It's tempting to say she employs the conventions of Surrealism to this end. But while the Surrealists depicted impossible objects in real space, Alling renders the

strangeness of real nature in a dream space. The radical disjunction between figure and ground in her paintings defies laws of perspective, but this space contains no impossible objects. On the contrary, the weirdness in nature emerges all the more forcefully by her placement of totally believable flowers in unbelievable space. Through art, Alling undertakes the difficult task of showing that reality is stranger than art—and she succeeds.

Unlike another outside-flower painter, Georgia O'Keeffe, she doesn't celebrate the formal geometry and sensuality of nature. Rather, she explores nature's drama, seeking the full range of astonishing sights from the thrust of a single leaf to the rich interactions



*Grouping*, 1984, oil, 60 x 72.

of flower groupings. By showing dramatic realities in a fictional space, Alling challenges our naive belief in reality, revealing it as merely one possibility and giving us clues as to how we make our own reality.

There is a definite romance in her realism. One of the strong influences that separates her not only from O'Keeffe but also from much of the large-scale realist movement—within which she might otherwise be placed—is that of the gestural painters of Abstract Expressionism. It is essential in Alling's paintings that the viewer see her hand at work. Art critic Roberta Smith said, "At first [Alling's] paintings seem photographically representational. But closer examination reveals them to be quite loosely painted, which makes their realism all the more surprising." Peter Scheldahl wrote that

Alling renders her flowers "with a wonderful intensity both of attention to visual fact and involvement in the act of painting." This conjunction of vision and action is crucial.

**L**ook at her huge dusty millers. Even from a rather large distance, the rawness, even haste, of a few brushstrokes nevertheless captures this species with deadly accuracy. But then all her flowers are conveyed by such swift, confident, economical actions—actions whose freedom would satisfy a Jackson Pollock. Some Super-Realists spend hours making both their subjects transparent and the intervention of their own hands invisible; instead, Alling leaves behind the vagaries of brute or graceful gestures. In her flower paintings, barely

controlled blotches of paint are also precise renderings of the outrageous patterns that identify a particular species. A mere gesture works because it somehow precisely gives us the identifying cue so we accept it as real. And this fact—the visible arbitrariness of the gestural surface in relation to the species we see through the gesture—shows viewers how what we bring to the act of seeing helps us make up what counts for real.

The artist's painting process starts simply with observing plants. "I choose the plants first," she says. "They're living things before me. I look at flowers from different angles and use different angles on the same plant, which contributes to its flatness. I make my compositions piecemeal—they are not still lifes."

*Continued on page 73*

## ALLING

Continued from page 35

Working only during the day, Alling paints the flowers in a flat light, sometimes waiting until late to capture the deep glow imparted to leaves and petals by the setting sun. Her backgrounds are based on photos of the sky, taken mostly from her studio. Combined with the fore-

ground, they elicit what she calls "a story or mood—a theme that brings together the feeling and structure in the plants." This theme is summed up in the title (*Apocalypse or The Conductor*, for instance). "But not all paintings have a story or mood, and I never impose one at the start," she explains, adding that if one comes, it results from her interaction with the developing composition. If not, the drama is purely visual.

Ultimately, Alling's subject matter is not flowers but reality and possibility. Clearly, her critical exploration of how we compose reality for ourselves could be carried on with equal drama with other subjects. But whether or not other subjects attract her, her flowers give us many tools for looking at our world with new eyes. They also give us enormous visual pleasure.

Alling most recently exhibited in a solo show at Trinity College of Vermont in Burlington last spring, and her work is currently included in the "American Still Life" show at the Park Avenue Atrium in New York City through November. ■

*Bob Stone teaches philosophy at C.W. Post College of Long Island University in New York.*

# AMERICAN ARTIST

OCTOBER 1994 VOLUME 58 ISSUE 627

## FEATURES

### 12 METHODS & MATERIALS: ACRYLICS—PART II: GELS AND MEDIUMS

by Laurie S. Hurwitz

Acrylics have a wide spectrum of consistencies, and artists can greatly expand their properties with the limitless mediums and gels on the market.

### 24 PAINTING EXPRESSIVELY WITH AN AIRBRUSH

by Eunice Agar

New Yorker Ross Barbera achieves the rich, painterly quality of his landscapes by using the dynamic range of traditional airbrush applications.

### 30 JANET ALLING'S PASSIONATE EYE

by Bob Stone

By manipulating scale, playing with the relation of figure to ground, and using dramatic color, this artist's lower paintings not only examine the limits of the real world but also invoke an exciting new one.

### 36 VISIONS OF THE PRESENT, TECHNIQUES OF THE PAST

by Bruno Sardo

Art should present powerful images that address the ideas, belief systems, and visions of its time. To help students acquire the skills needed to create such work, I founded the School of Representational Art in Evanston, Illinois.

### 42 THE WATERCOLOR PAGE: CONSTRUCTING "GRAPHIC WATERCOLORS"

by Bobbie White

### 46 THE PLEASURES AND PERILS OF PORTRAIT PAINTING

by Dorothy Barta

The challenge for a portrait painter is to maintain a sense of joy about painting while meeting the sometimes stringent demands of a client.

### 50 PAINTING HOLIDAYS: MAKING MIRACLES IN THE SOUTHWEST

by Laurie S. Hurwitz

Last spring, *American Artist* launched the first in a series of painting workshops. Inspired by colorful canyons, deep valleys, and winding trails, a group of participants and two master artists painted the magnificent New Mexican landscape.

### 60 NUTS & BOLTS

Resources and practical information for artists.

## DEPARTMENTS

### 4 WELCOME

### 6 LETTERS

### 8 EXHIBITS

### 18 TECHNICAL PAGE

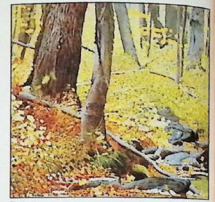
by Steven Sheehan

### 77 BULLETIN BOARD

### 79 INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

### 80 COMING IN NOVEMBER

### 80 RECOMMENDED BOOKS



Barbera Page 41



Alling Page 30



Barta Page 58



White Page 42

Cover: *Stone Patience* (detail, shown in reverse), by Chuck Foreman, 1987, oil on Masonite and wood, 55 x 81 x 3 1/2. Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, New York.

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2 AMERICAN ARTIST