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The Pastel Journal

THE MAGAZINE FOR ARTISTS WHO WORK IN SOFT PASTELS

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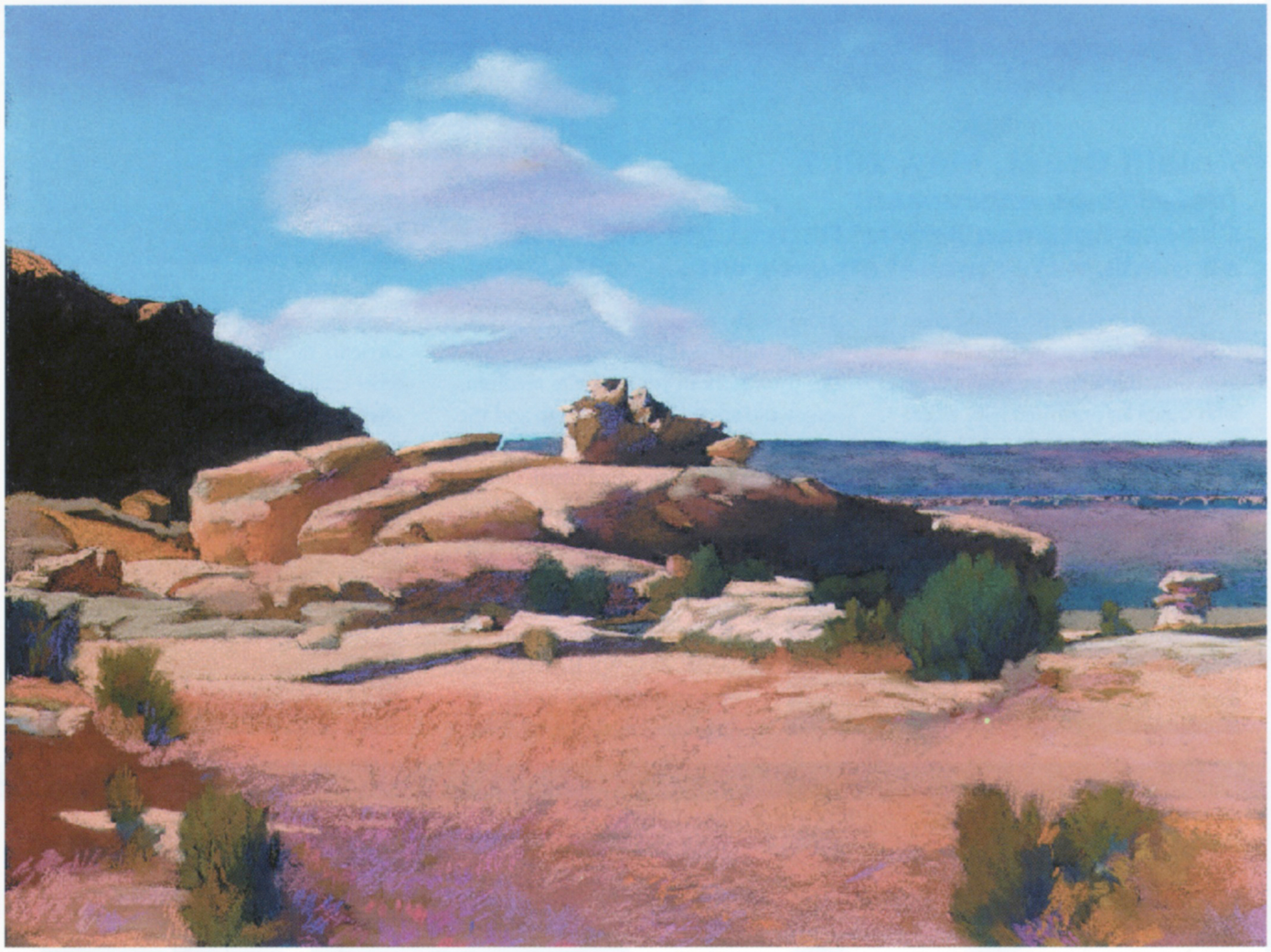


MARY SILVERWOOD

Painting the shapes and colors of nature in pastel

BY RUTH SUMMER

MARY SILVERWOOD received her BFA from the University of Texas at Austin, Texas, with additional studies at Sonoma State University in California. She has had numerous exhibitions with the Joyce Robins Gallery in Santa Fe, where her work is presently shown. Her pastel paintings and prints are in numerous corporate and private collections.

Like many New Mexicans, Mary Silverwood came from someplace else. Her process of moving to the Southwest was similar to that of many other "transplants" as well—after living in Northern California for 40 years, she found herself traveling repeatedly to Santa Fe for shows and to the gallery that handles her work, and after a while it just looked like a good idea to move closer. Last year she bought a house in rural New Mexico, where mountains and desert and the river area known as the "bosque" provide her with a constant source of painting material.

"I'm not a plein air painter," Mary says, establishing her position right from the beginning. "I see no reason to be. I'm not an Impressionist; I don't go for the moment. I love my studio, and that's where I like to paint. What interests me is careful composition," she explains, "and I don't need to put up with the outdoors for that. I want a bathroom nearby, and coffee and music. And I like to paint sitting down." She indicates the low, comfortable office-type chair that rolls easily on the plastic mat in front of her easel.

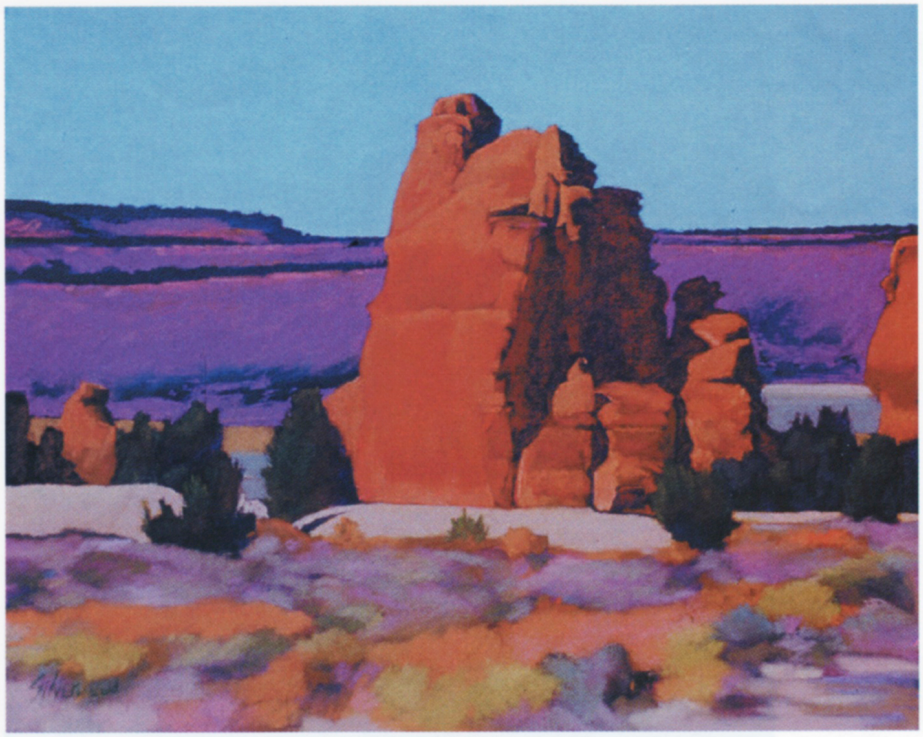
"And another thing," Mary grins, "let's just get this out of the way. Don't use the word 'capture.' I can't stand it when people say artists capture lights and colors. I don't capture anything, I just paint." Upon a moment's reflection, Mary realizes that there could be just one more small distinction she'd like to make. "And the word 'pastelist' conjures an image for me of little Victorian ladies painting delicate flowers. I'd rather be referred to as an artist who works in pastels." Having laid her ground rules, she's happy to talk about how she works.

"I travel with my camera through New Mexico," she says, "and I take photos, with the intent to transpose the landscape into art. I paint what I see, and viewers bring their own interpretation to the painting. A viewer with an educated eye—educated in art—sees more in a painting, and therefore brings more sensitivity to the action. There is no high-falutin' spiritual interpretation *built into* my paintings. Any spiritual aspect is brought to the painting by the viewer."

Mary is very down to earth in her approach to life and her art. "Especially here in the Southwest, where the writers are very esoteric, they like to talk about things like 'the spirit roaming the landscape'," she chuckles. "I just love the shapes of all parts of nature, and the colors—that's what thrills me, that's what I want to paint."

She likes to venture out away from civilization and observe nature in its wilder state. For her photo adventures, she gets a friend to drive, or sometimes hires someone to drive her. "That way I can just *look*, take photographs, and not worry about the road.

"Recently, a friend and I went south looking for a ghost town we'd heard about called Riley. The drive got wilder as we traveled onto washboard roads into mountainous country. We had maps and a cell phone, so we had no fear, really, but it is odd going into a place like that, not knowing at all what you'll find. Eventually we found a church, where Riley should have been, but it wasn't all that old. Then we saw the crumbling remains of two adobe buildings: Riley! It was just an odd experience," Mary says, "but I took lots of photographs. I'm working on a series of paintings now that will be called 'Searching for Riley'."

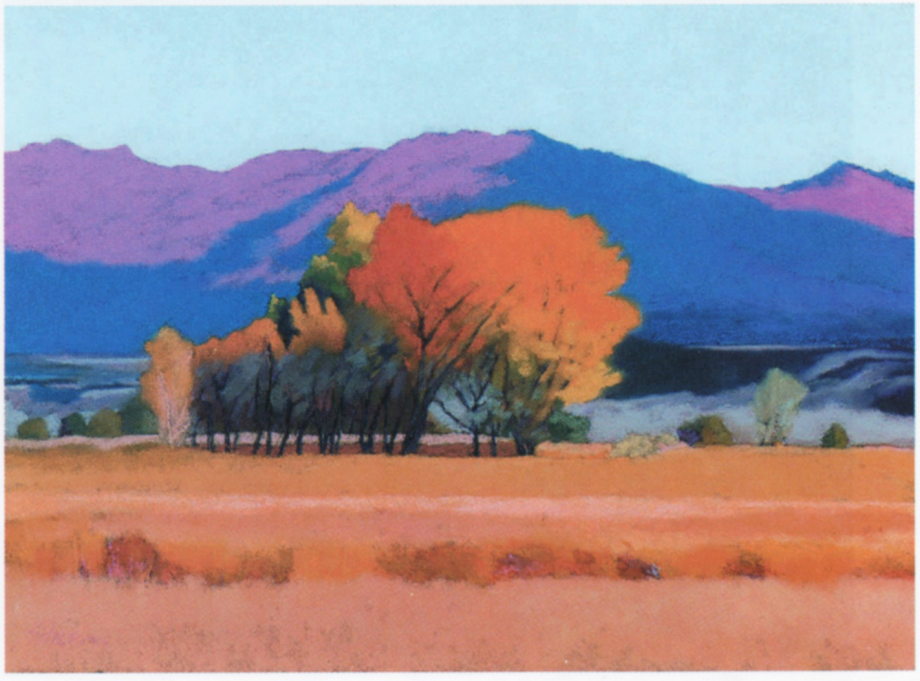


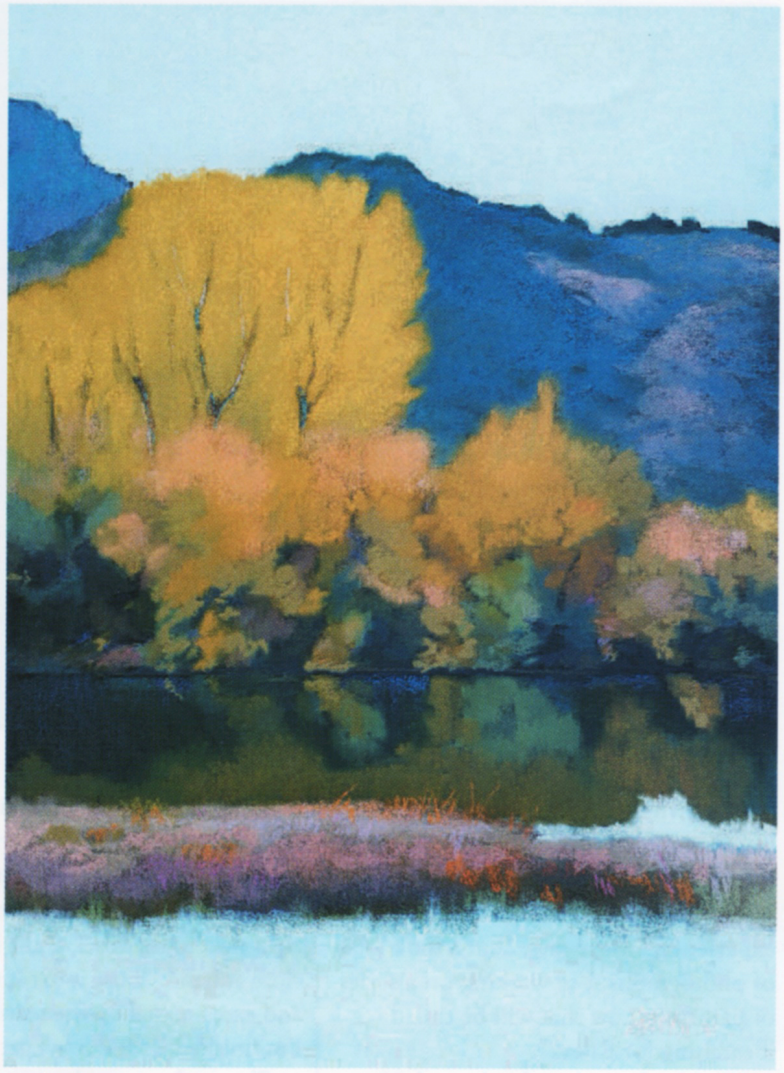
Above, Acoma No. 7, Red Rock, 21"x26"; opposite page, Acoma No. 6, 21"x28"

On Mary's easel is a bright underpainting, the beginning of a painting of a mountain near Magdalena. Her sturdy easel is set low so she can paint comfortably sitting. There is a vacuum cleaner right next to the easel, and a hair dryer close at hand. "I use it to get rid of dust and excess pastel on the painting when I'm finished, so it doesn't get on the mat."

She works every day in a large, airy

Bright Cottonwoods, 22"x30"





Above, Still Water, 29"x21; below, Raton No. 2, 16"x20"

garage attached to her house, close to the amenities. "It's a multi-use garage," she explains, pointing to the mats where her two dogs, Betsy and Polly, are allowed to hang out and watch her paint. Several portraits around Mary's house attest to the fact that Betsy and Polly are models as well as companions.

Mary's setup is simple and utilitarian. Her pastels sit, in the boxes they are sold in, on several card tables to the left of her easel. Besides her easel, chair and pastel table, she has a long flat-file storage unit with five drawers for storing work or paper, and very little of the stacks and boxes often found in studios. The area is open and uncluttered and would feel spartan if it weren't also comfortable. "At first I had no easel," Mary recalls, "I just propped the painting up on boxes.

"I didn't realize at the time how rough my setup was when I started with pastels," she recalls. "I was born in the Depression; I know how to make do." She surveys her somewhat sparse studio with an air of satisfaction. "Now I have all I need."

Because of her isolated location, she mostly buys pastels by mail order. "I buy sets sometimes, but they usually have too many colors I don't want, so I order individual sticks from charts until I find ones I like," she says. She uses mainly Schminckes, "especially for skies and big areas where you use so much pastel—you get more for your money with those. And Sennelier has some wonderful subtle colors, the exact grayed-ness of color that I want."

Mary has used Arches Cover black paper since her early pastel days. "At first I liked trying different kinds of paper, different colors, but once I tried this, I stuck with it. I like to work dark to light, and it works very well for me," she says, as firm about what she likes as what she doesn't.

Mary had studied art in school, "but after getting my BFA in school, I stopped making art for about fifteen years. Various reasons. I was confused, and didn't feel much confidence. I was

teaching school for a living, and decided to go back to school myself and be a CPA. I know!" she laughs, "it doesn't make sense. But I did go back, and it was so dull and boring that I started hanging out in the art department." Her next step, she says, was inevitable as well as obvious: she officially moved to the art department.

"But I was so afraid—after all that time—that I couldn't do it!" she admits. "I was so terrified that I signed up for all the beginning classes, drawing, composition, everything. But it all came back!" She continued to develop her own work while teaching and taking more classes. And then she discovered pastels. "In a composition class, a teacher did a demonstration with pastel. I thought 'this is it!' No more washing brushes, no more stretching canvas, no more dangerous soaked rags laying around!"

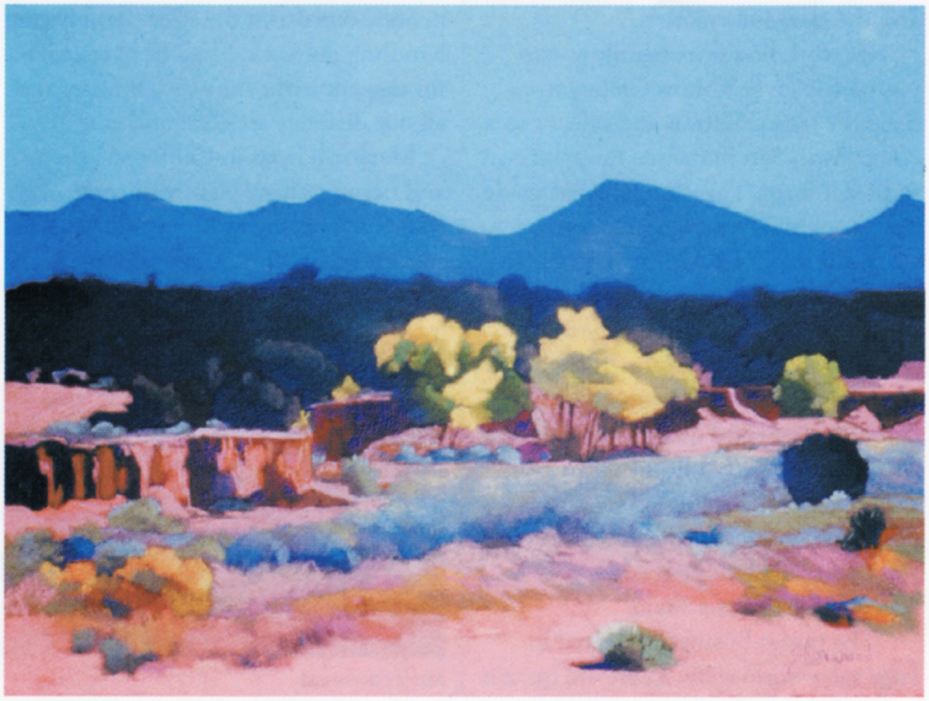
So she got an intro set of pastels, then a few more and a few more. "It's wonderful to have the pre-made colors," she says, "but you have to have a lot of them. You can only mix so much, and it's just aggravating when you don't have the right color."

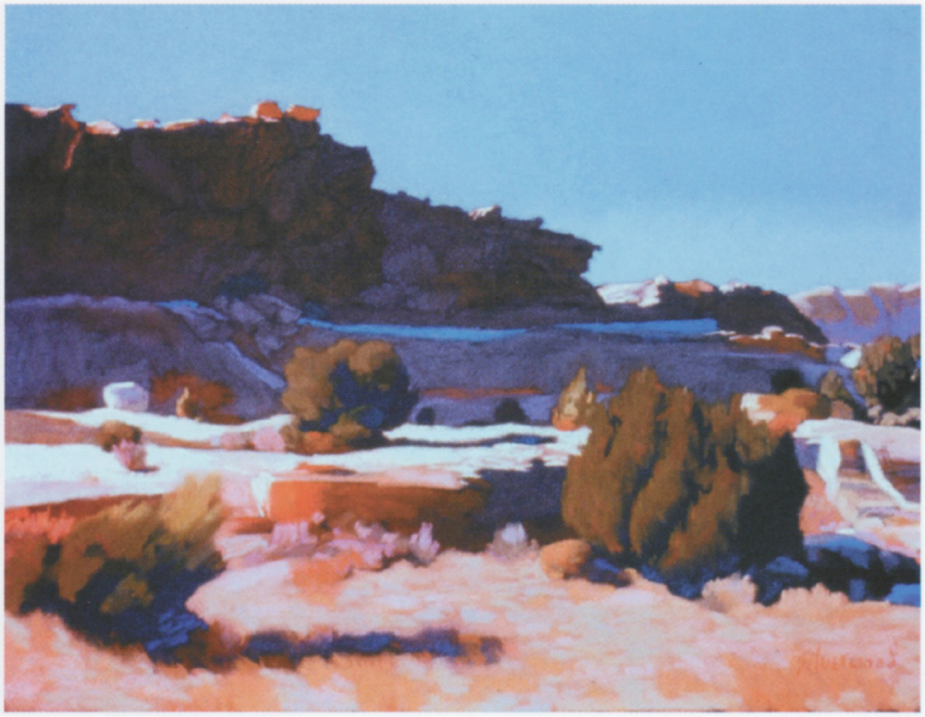
When she first began using pastel, Mary says, "I had to rediscover how to make art. I did figure and portrait work at first, then started learning the landscape. I found it really grew on me, the endless colors and shapes—it became a drive, a compulsion, my passion."

She soon had enough for a show. "One thing about pastel, it's a very fast medium, so you can make lots of art." A framer she knew helped her organize a show at a winery, she recalls. "I'd never had a show, so I didn't know what to expect. It turned out to be a rainy day, so I thought no one would show up. Then people just poured in, and it was so crowded you couldn't walk through the room. I was pretty excited. But at five o'clock everyone suddenly left. I went to get some food, but it was all gone, and I was starved. I realized then that people will go out, even in the rain, for free food and drink and to look at art. But I did make sales, and people now knew about me."

Mary learned the hard way about the business end of selling her paintings. "I had no experience or knowledge about what an agent should do, and I made several mistakes because of that. I wanted someone else to do the marketing of my work so I could just paint, but at first I made the common error of just trusting a friend to do it. I didn't think I'd need a contract, and didn't have the courage to ask for one. There have been other bad experiences along the way; one time I did go to a lawyer for a contract, and what I got was overly complicated but didn't even have the things I wanted in it." She cautions any

Above, White Clouds over Cottonwood Trees, 21"x28"; below, Rattlesnake Gully, 21"x28"





Highway 6, No. 2, 21"x27"

artist who is just beginning to sell work to stay very aware of what's happening, and get agreements in writing.

She also stresses the importance of keeping good records of one's artwork. "I keep a notebook with a page for each painting," she says, "It has a photo of the painting, its name and number, and all the consignment information about where it goes, to a show, or a gallery, and the sales information."

Her work now goes mainly to two places: the Joyce Robins Gallery in Santa Fe for exhibition and sale, or to a company in San Francisco for printing in poster form. This company has made posters of Mary's artwork for some years, she says. "I have about 15 different posters out now, and there will be a couple of new ones this next year.

"Posters are not usually considered fine art, but if you use a good printing company and good quality paper, and if the painting is good in the first place, they're nice, affordable prints. I do *not* do limited editions," she says. "I consider a so-called 'limited edition' of 2,000-3,000 prints a sham.

"The poster business is geared to large sales world-wide. There are quite a few sales to hotels, for instance, that give my work a lot of exposure, as well as bring me royalty income."

Mary says in her case the posters led to the gallery, rather than the other way around. "There was a wonderful woman in Santa Fe who saw my posters and loved them; she sold originals of my work for years in her gallery. Later she closed her gallery, and Joyce Robins opened one down the street, and began handling my work. She's been wonderful to work with; she's very honest, and all our dealings are clear and easy."

Mary still lived in California, then, and began visiting New Mexico for shows or to bring more paintings. "The scenery in California was no longer challenging me. New Mexico was endlessly fascinating, and I was enthusiastic about photographing things I wanted to paint. So I decided to move to where I wanted to paint." When she left, the newspaper in her California hometown ran an article titled *Mary Doesn't Live Here Anymore,* lamenting her decision.

Mary Silverwood

"On one hand, I'm thrilled to be out in the country now," Mary says, "but it wasn't easy leaving the community that I had. They didn't exactly print an article *here* about my moving in. Even when the little newspaper here eventually mentioned my work, my neighbors didn't notice, or had no interest.

"When I first got here, I did some paintings of places where I came from," Mary admits. "It really helped the homesick feeling." She laughs, recalling that she'd just said she had become bored with painting California. "I probably painted Sonoma County more after I moved out here!"

But she soon began to settle into her new home. "I thought of how unhappy I was years ago when I was teaching school all day, and living in an apartment, with people around all the time, and I realized I really am a rural person, and happy to be out here."

"There's a basic conflict," she continues, "between my absolute need for the rural silence and beauty, and the fact that most of the people I want to hang out with are in cities. Some days I'd like to have a coffee shop to drop in, and run into a friend there, maybe another artist," Mary lets her fantasy run free, "maybe even another vegetarian! But it's okay really, because the tradeoff is that I've got great views, the painting subjects I need, right outside my door. I might like some new friends, but I'm happy to have my doggies Polly and Betsy still with me.

"The main thing is that I get to be here, right in this wondrous wild place," Mary says. "The landscape, the wildlife and the culture—well, I'm right here in it all, and I feel very blessed."

■ *Ruth Summer is a pastel artist and writer, and associate editor of* The Pastel Journal.