

LIFE'S canvas

Creating

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

BY HALEY COTE

"Late Day Storm Clouds", 24x12

Rachel Avenia loves to be in nature. Biking, bird watching, kayaking, rowing, sailing, even beekeeping—she and her husband, Bob Prol, have several beehives at Johnson Tree Farm in Sandwich.

"I'd rather be outside than inside," Avenia says with a laugh. Of all her outdoor hobbies, the one she cherishes most is painting. Cape Cod, especially her hometown Sandwich, serves as a constant source of inspiration for her pastel pieces—from the flooded cranberry bogs along 6A and the marshland of Scorton Creek, to the purple-shadowed dunes of Sandy Neck and the rolling fields of Long Pasture Wildlife Sanctuary.

R. AVENIA

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For Avenia, her paintings are more than just depictions of landscapes. In fact, she explains, they're more like "love letters" to her favorite places—an opportunity for her to make a personal connection with her surroundings.

"It's kind of like the slow food movement, where the whole thing is about really taking the time to savor what you're eating. I think it's the same thing with my paintings—that it's not just the painting that's the output, it's the whole experience that feeds into that," she says. "Having something that can tell a story, even if it's only a story that I'm telling to myself, is meaningful."

"She has a unique perspective in how she does her art," says Prol, who, as an artist himself—a woodcarver—says Avenia has taught him the importance of both detail and subtlety in art. "It feels authentic. And it's so sharp that it just grabs you."

Avenia met Prol when they both lived in New Jersey, where she is



Above: "Fog on the Marsh, Jones Road"
12" x 18"

Right: "Beach Path"
12" x 12"

Opposite, top: "Marsh Fireflies"
10" x 8"

Opposite, bottom:
"Race Point Dunes"
18" x 12"



originally from. She attended college at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, where she majored in commercial art and graphic design, going on to work as an art director in publishing. "Then, at the beginning of the desktop publishing revolution, I could see the writing on the wall; my job was not going to be around forever," she recalls. So, being technically inclined, she started working in IT project management. "My professional career went that way, but I've always enjoyed painting and come back to it over and over again."

Over the years Avenia has found herself particularly drawn to pastel. "I love pastels because they're so vibrant and they're so immediate—it's instant gratification," she says. "You put some color down and it's like 'Wow!' It pops." She credits her first pastel teacher in New Jersey, Dannielle Mick, as one of her greatest influences, as well as American tonalists Wolf Kahn, Edgar Degas, and British artist David Hockney. Hockney's book "A History

of Pictures" proved to be particularly influential. "He talks about what was going on in the world at the time artists like Degas were painting and how they brought that into their paintings. It really gave me an appreciation for a sense of place," she explains. "It's all about, for me, a sense of place, and that place is Cape Cod."

Avenia and Prol fell in love with the Cape while he was on a short-term training assignment at Camp Edwards on Joint Base Cape Cod, and they eventually decided to move here full time. "It's really the light that drew me to the Cape—that perfect moment when the light is so gorgeous that it makes me want to paint something," she says. "In New Jersey you don't get such a big sky view—it's so built up—but being by the water here, it's just this huge horizon of sky, and it's so beautiful."

Avenia says she always looks at the sky when painting *en plein air*, observing how the clouds are influencing the



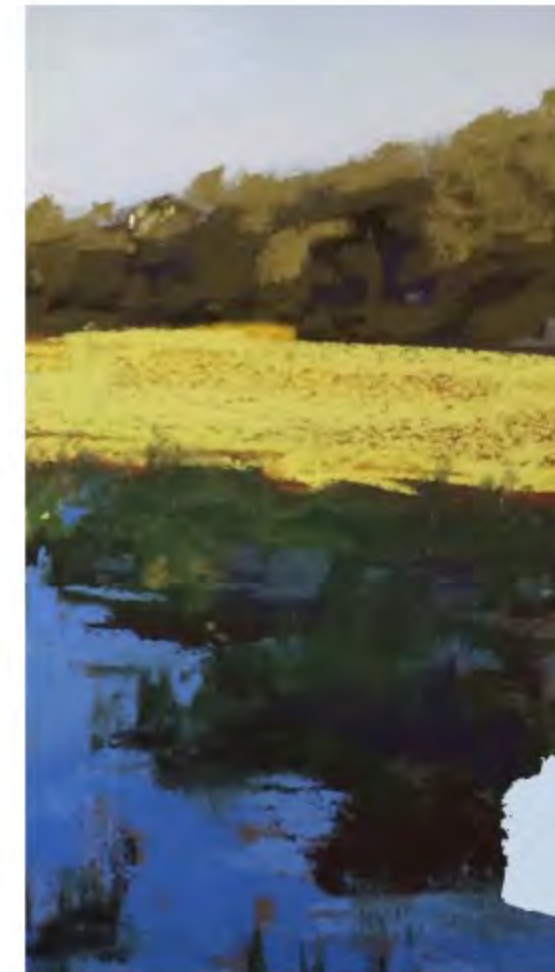
light. She notes, "With plein air it's important to work fairly quickly because the light's changing all the time, and depending upon the time of day, you may have 20 minutes, you may have an hour, but anything longer than that, now your shadows have moved, and the color of the light's changed." If she's pleased with her painting, she says she'll take it back to her home studio and turn it into a larger piece.

Studio sessions often take place first thing in the morning before she heads to her day job—across the hall in her home office, where she works remotely as a project manager for cloud-computing life sciences company Veeva. The job requires her to travel, often to Indianapolis. Even in her routine travels around the city in Ubers and Lyfts, Avenia views the experiences the way she views her artwork—with insight.

"In retrospect thinking about the trip, I look at the summaries—the little maps—from Lyft or Uber, and it's cool because I'm looking at what's almost like a piece of art—it's a 2D representation of what happened," she says. "And putting them all together tells an interesting story about the drivers and the landscape there and about navigating through that area. It's interesting how you interact with things and what you're left with—the physical manifestation. It's kind of like painting. You go somewhere and paint, then you've got this physical manifestation of your time there," she adds.



"Summer on Scorton Creek", 10x8



"If you look at something in the right light, you can get a more nuanced experience from it," she reflects. "It could just be an Uber trip, or it could be a cool piece of art that is something more than just the trip."

As she continues to capture the world around her, Avenia says she is excited to experiment with painting from memory, concentrating less on the literal and more on the essence of landscapes. "I want to leave more room in the painting for the viewer to think about it on their terms—to bring their own story, their own experiences, to my painting," she explains. "I think paintings become more interesting when you can put yourself in the scene."

Haley Cote is the assistant editor for Cape Cod Life Publications.

Rachel Avenia's work is sold at Hillport Gallery, Bobby Baker Gallery, The Spotted Cod and Furniture Re-Born.
For more information, visit rachelavenia.com



"Sandy Neck", 12x6