

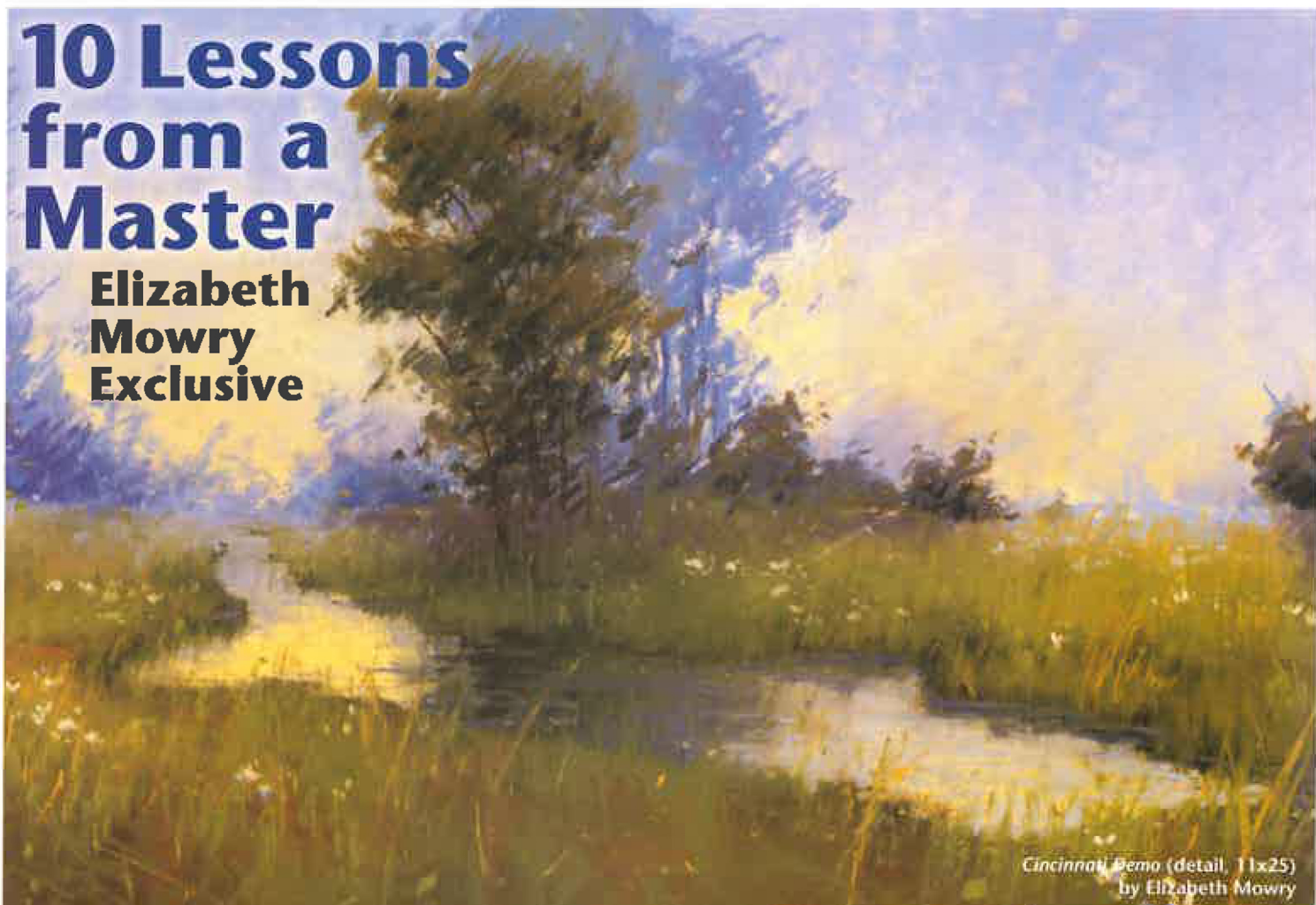
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**Elizabeth  
Mowry  
Exclusive**



*Cincinnati Demo (detail, 11x25)  
by Elizabeth Mowry*

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# JULIE FRIEDMAN

*Fearless landscapes from an artist who's learned to trust  
her instincts and let go.*

**By Deborah Christensen Secor**

Light of New Hope (24x36)





Julie Friedman may be a tad under five feet tall, but she's taken some sizeable steps in her career as an artist. In 2001 she stepped out, moving through fear of failure into artistically bold risk-taking. Her experiences working with Wolf Kahn, as well as her first show, held near her home in New Jersey just nine days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, profoundly affected her attitude.

"I felt uncertain about putting my work out. When my show opened I stood there very differently than I would have prior to the events of September 11. That catastrophe helped me temper the feelings of uncertainty and just push forward with my work. There's no question that it was a motivating force to take the leap and show my passion. I had just turned 40, and I thought 'one day' can come and go pretty quickly—it's time to do it."

### Taking a Chance

After earning her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1984 from Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University (New Jersey), where she majored in oil painting, Friedman took a 13-year break from painting to work as a textile designer and to rear her three children. "My goal was to one day be able to go back to painting full time, and in 1997 a local art association advertised a weekend workshop with Wolf Kahn," she explains. "I'd never worked in pastel before and was terrified to step back into the studio. My husband, Ed, who's always been so supportive, came home with the biggest box of pastels he could find and said, 'Now you have to do it.' I walked into the workshop looking like a child with this Rolls-Royce set of Schmincke pastels. That weekend with Wolf Kahn changed everything for me. His use of color was so inspiring that I jumped in and never looked back."

Although Friedman was greatly influenced by Kahn's style, she spent more than three years working with



Season of Change (36x36)

another fine artist, Christina Debarry: "I learned so much from her. She was a wonderful teacher. We painted on La Carte paper, and she taught us to build up layers methodically. I used to spend six or seven weeks on a painting, thinking that each stroke might ruin everything, babying each painting. That's part of the reason that I paint every day now. Every painting is less important; after all, I'll be doing another one tomorrow."

### Color within Value

Friedman's work retains an emotional link to color, inspired by Kahn, that relies on strong contrasts of light and dark, as well

as solid underlying shapes, to describe the response she has to the landscape. (See "A Legacy of Influences" on page 51.) "I'm more interested in the light than in the subject matter. My goal isn't to record exactly what I see but express what I feel about what I'm seeing. My passion is to find strong color within the value, so I love to put an unexpected color somewhere in the painting."

"Nothing is more exciting to me than hitting the color or value right with the first stroke of pastel. It's about letting go and having faith that all you know will instinctively come into play, that what you put down initially will be honest." To



Afternoon Walk (24x30)

increase her chances of finding the right color from the start, Friedman begins with a bold underpainting. "I rough-in things in an overstated way. Then I lay it flat on the ground and use alcohol and a brush to wash over the pastels, laying down my darkest darks and lightest lights. I fill the rest with local color, exaggerating whatever I see. I want to see how far I can push something; there's always time to pull back later. The underpainting is a testing ground for my palette so that when it's time to paint over it I already have an idea of certain colors that belong to the painting and others that don't work. This helps keep my paintings loose and fresh. I don't underpaint the skies though, because I've found that dark lines can show through the delicate color. I use Unisons and Giraults in the skies, which work beautifully together, and then I use my pinkie finger to touch or coax the colors together without really blending.

"I have to be careful how much pastel I put on the paper before using the alcohol because the tooth of the paper can get a little filled up, and if I use too much alcohol it can buckle the paper slightly. I

use straight isopropyl alcohol that dries almost instantly. I have no patience! I'm passionate, and I'm a big believer in just jumping in. I allow myself a brief period to

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think about things, plotting out composition and basic color decisions in 10 to 15 minutes, and then I jump in and try just to react without thinking too much."

### **Knowing When to Let Go**

Friedman's experiments with underpainting helped her trust her own ability to let

go and still accurately convey the place and her emotional link to it. "My big breakthrough came when I was finally out of the classroom and alone in the studio. I allowed myself to experiment with underpainting on Wallis paper. Over time I started to realize that the more I second-guessed my impulses, the 'safer' the painting became, but when I took risks I could push the painting further. Now I keep in mind that whatever I put down during the underpainting stage will be painted over, which gives me the freedom to put down my reaction quickly."

Friedman didn't arrive at this free-wheeling way of working overnight. "I bet I killed the first 200 I painted. Each one had a place where it was good and then I went too far," she says. "It takes confidence and vision to know when to stop. The best paintings, the strongest ones, are often done very quickly. So often the idea of 'better' kills what's good—so be happy with good. I once took a painting to a critique with a group of painters I considered to be more advanced than I was. I'd put maybe 30 or 40 minutes into the painting and decided to show it that way. When I put it up, all the artists there said that I shouldn't touch it, so I didn't. It's a view of the farm behind our house, called *Frost on the Farm* (on page 52)."

### **A Room of Her Own**

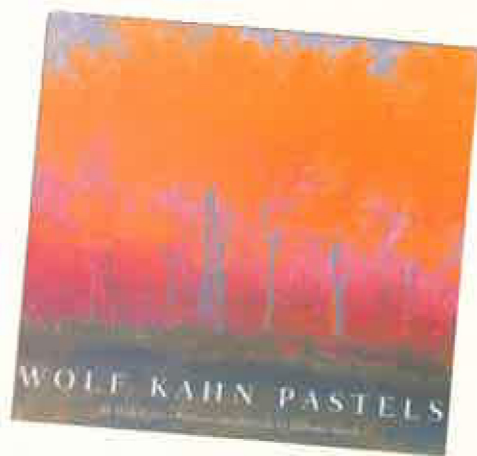
White Wallis museum-grade sanded paper is Friedman's choice for all her paintings. She cuts sheets from a roll, usually preferring larger sizes. "I work big. My training was in oils and I used to do 6x8-foot paintings back in my college days," she notes. Her easel accommodates boards as large as 40x60 inches, and her step stool stands nearby, ready for those times when she can't reach high enough.

Her studio is a large, sunny room located in a historical building. It retains glowing, old hardwood floors and the shell of a fireplace that no longer works. "When I moved my studio out of my home and into this space, I made a serious commitment to my work, and I needed a quiet space where there was a lot of



## A Legacy of Influences

Wolf Kahn's family fled Nazi Germany in 1940, when the artist was 12. After graduating from the High School of Music and Art in New York City, Kahn studied at The Hans Hofmann School, where he became Hofmann's studio assistant and sometime translator. Arguably more influential as a teacher than as an artist, Hofmann (1880-1966), introducing his students to the European *avant-garde*, stressed what he called "pictorial mechanics." His signature work is confrontational, positing rectangles of primary colors on an abstract expressionist field. Kahn's own approach to color is less theoretical than Hofmann's and more lyrical; his evocations of landscapes have their origins in a place but evoke realities beyond and within. Two wonderful books are *Wolf Kahn Pastels* by Barbara Novak (2000, Abrams) and *Wolf Kahn's America: An Artist's Travels: Paintings, pastels and text* by Wolf Kahn, edited by Elaine Stainton (2003, Abrams).—M.B.



creative energy. When I work I like to play music and get lost in what I'm doing, and this space allows me to do that without interruption. I love all the old, interesting cubby spaces. The room has so much charm that it makes me feel peaceful and creative."

## Pastel Preferences

Friedman's large wooden pastel palette tray sits atop a wheeled table, the luscious colors filling the wooden compartments, organized by value, color and temperature.

"I still have a lot of the Schminckes, but my favorite pastels are the Giraults. They're wonderful on Wallis paper—a great combination. I also like Diane Townsend pastels. They're the best when you want to put in a really vivid color. Nothing cuts through like the Terrages. I use Unisons for my skies because they're buttery and I can blend them nicely. For hard pastels I like the Cretacolors best. I break my pastels into 1- or 2-inch lengths and paint using the sides of the sticks to keep me fresh and loose."

Misty Morning (31x42)



Most often Friedman begins her thought process with a few quick thumb-nail sketches that she executes in the first five minutes before throwing them in the trash. "They just make me comfortable," she says, "helping me locate things on the paper. I find the less I think, the better off I am. Ideally, I like to complete a *plein air* study, but that's not always possible. Sometimes the *plein air* study is the complete painting; other times I use photographs with it to finish the painting in the studio. I rely on the photo for certain compositional elements while my focus in the outdoor painting is to record color."

## Pushing Boundaries

"I'm not a subtle painter—I'm usually more of an in-your-face painter, and I work very hard to push myself," says Friedman, pointing out Kahn's admonition that painting what you already know is merely an exercise in self-congratulation. Her experiments have recently led her to try new subjects, including bright buildings as well as the quiet colors and contrasts of *Misty Morning* (at left).

Friedman rarely reworks a painting—preferring to start each one on a clean, white piece of paper. If the painting fails, rather than correcting problems, she uses a small mat to locate interesting visual sections of the painting. "In every failed

painting there's at least one beautiful passage, so I go over every inch of it looking for an interesting bit of abstraction. I don't think of myself as an abstract painter and I don't think I'm heading that way, but I like looking for these abstract parts. I cut them out, mat them and put them in my portfolio to sell."

### **Paying it Forward**

For more than two years Friedman has taught pastel painting to adult students. "I never considered myself a teacher until the Somerset Art Association asked me to start. I love teaching as much as I love painting. It feels so good to discuss what you're passionate about, and I learn as much from my students as they learn from me. So much of the work that's done in my class inspires me

and pushes me in directions I might not otherwise have gone. When I started I was a little fearful because, as an honest person, I was afraid I'd sometimes have nothing positive to say to a student. But it amazes me how truly and honestly there's something beautiful in every painting. I can be honest about each one. From my own experience as a student, I know sometimes constructive advice is a little hard to take. I think you have to be ready to hear it.

"I was in a workshop with Frank Zucarelli one time and he was looking at my painting. He said, 'You have Mozart in the back and Beethoven in the front and Bach in the middle. Turn it down a little—it's so noisy!' At first it was hard, but all he was saying was that I needed some quiet areas and one focal area. I've

thought about that comment a lot ever since. You know, when a teacher is hard on you it's because he sees something in you. That's a story I always tell my students."

The exciting color challenges she learned from Kahn have found their way into her classroom as well. "He does some wonderful exercises. I credit him completely and use those exercises in my classes. Last year I went to his workshop at the National Academy School of Fine Arts in Manhattan and he was doing the same exercises he did in 1997. They're so good. He had us make nine squares and put a color we just love in the center. Then all the other colors must spark the center color and support each other. The colors vibrate together. He puts the squares out for the whole class to look at and has the students pick the best ones. Then he

Frost on the Farm (24x36)







A Familiar Path (31x42)

chooses the winner and gives a prize, maybe a jar of jam he made on his farm. I was the runner-up. He said the reason I didn't win was that the edges didn't kiss each other properly. The way the edges meet, that sensitively done edge that's lost or found, makes the difference between a good painting and a wonderful one.

"The second exercise was fun, too. He had us paint a parade. We weren't allowed to use anything but color and line. A parade has unimportant, boring little people at the start, then the big crescendo and the last stragglers bringing up the rear. He also had us make a color sandwich, finding colors that were crunchy, slimy, ones that were meat, cheese, lettuce."

### Facing Fear

Fearless contrast, bold color, allowing herself to reach into the depths of her experience and quickly respond—these are now

the hallmarks of Friedman's work. Yet she says she lived a lot of her life in fear. "So many of my teachers said, 'it's just a piece of paper' but I was afraid of failing. I remember the day when I finally got my work into a 'real' gallery. They offered me a show in the off-season as an up-and-



Julie Friedman

coming artist; they put one of my paintings on a postcard, but they decided not to have a reception. When I told my husband how disappointed I was, he said, 'Call them back and tell them you want a reception and you'll guarantee 50 people will be there. No guts, no glory.' So I picked up the phone, shaking all over, and called. They agreed and then I called everyone I knew and asked them to come—and they did. I often think about what he said, no guts, no glory. That's good to remember."

■ Julie Friedman lives in Morristown, New Jersey, where she conducts studio classes. She's represented by the following New Jersey galleries: J. Cacciola Gallery (Bernardsville), Walker Kornbuth Gallery (Fairlawn) and Louisa Melrose Gallery (Frenchtown). To see more of her art, visit [www.juliefriedmanart.com](http://www.juliefriedmanart.com).