



Truth, Beauty and Stillness

Mary Monk takes a no-nonsense approach to capture the alluring nuances of the Louisiana marshland.

BY JOHN A. PARKS





Marsh Tracks
(18x12)

**Windy Day on
Lake Pontchartrain**
(center; 18x18)

On previous
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Dusk, Early Spring
(12x18)

“I PAINT WHAT’S TRUE AND WHAT’S THERE,” says Louisiana-based Mary Monk.

“I don’t tweak things. What I love is what I see, and I enjoy being able to get that on paper.”

Monk’s principle subject matter is the marshland to the northeast of Lake Pontchartrain in her native state. It’s a vast stretch of flats, outcroppings and muddy pools textured with a rich variety of reeds, grasses, and the occasional low tree. The horizon drops away into the far distance, leaving the skies entirely open. Lacking the drama of hills and valleys, it’s an environment that encourages a sensitivity to subtle relationships of color and texture, and a delight in skies reflected in rivulets and shallow pools.

As she builds her account of the landscape, Monk’s paintings take on a quiet, open stillness infused with the soft watery light of the marshes. It’s the sort of attention and grasp that only

comes from deep familiarity with a landscape and delight in eliciting the truth from a subject.

Ready for Anything

To achieve her direct and responsive pastels, Monk sets herself up for success by ensuring that she’s fully prepared for all of the eventualities of her days of plein air painting.

The first step in her preparation is selecting the time of day for painting. “I paint mostly in the evening, but sometimes at dawn,” she says. “The drama of the light at evening makes it the most beautiful time of day. Also, there’s a little more slowness in the way the light changes. Painting at dawn is more challenging, and I usually set up in the dark and wait for the light.”

To ensure that she’s able to make a quick getaway for her painting forays, Monk keeps her car packed at all times, which is the second part of



WORTH THE STRUGGLE



Almost all of Monk's work is done en plein air, an approach that originally came to her as something of a revelation. "A few years ago, a colleague invited me to participate in a plein air exhibition with some really amazing artists," she says. "I had never painted en plein air before, so I packed my easel and paints and went out to work.

"It was an awful experience that included extremely determined bugs, several alligators and myriad other distractions. I came home at the end of that very difficult day and thought, 'I'll never do this again.'" Exhausted, she leaned the painting against her bedroom wall.

"The next morning, that painting was the first thing I saw when I woke," she continues. "I was shocked. Seeing it with fresh eyes, I realized something that would forever change my method of work: I saw that my worst painting done en plein air is still better than my best painting done in my studio. I decided immediately it was worth the struggle."

Monk became a committed plein air painter and found that it began to get easier. "I learned what works and what doesn't," she says. "It's extremely peaceful to work out in nature. The peace and solitude become as much of a need as the act of painting itself."

her preparation. "It's stocked with extra pastels and extra paper; empty boxes for my ongoing work; wipes; rain gear; a wagon; and umbrellas for bad weather and for sun," she says. "I have bug spray, Benadryl and Band-Aids. I have boots to wear when there's a little water and boots appropriate for navigating a lot of water. I have several hats for all kinds of weather. And, I have an ice chest filled with drinks and snacks."

Monk's careful preparation naturally extends to her painting equipment and materials. "I use a full-sized Julian French easel, because I've found that metal easels don't work in wetlands," she explains. "I have two large Heilman pastel boxes. In one, I have all of the colors I use all of the time—and every value I can find for each color. The second contains specialty colors that complement my environment, but to a lesser degree." She places the first box in front of her when painting;





**Late Evening
Marsh Tree** (12x18)

**Foggy Marsh
Morning** (below;
12x18)

the second is placed on the back of the easel, which balances the weight distribution. Thanks to the second box, Monk rarely has to return to her car to look for a color she doesn't have. She also carries a brush to remove pastel, a tool that doubles as a measuring stick for judging intervals.

She works on pastel paper that has been professionally mounted to Gator Board so that

she avoids having to clamp paper to a board. "Wind and humidity are a constant issue in the locations where I paint, so having sturdy boards that don't bend in the wind are necessary," Monk says. She also keeps a variety of surface sizes and formats in her car so that she always has options. This approach also avoids the issue of having a large board that partially obscures her view.

The final leg of Monk's preparation is preparing to be surprised. "I like to leave the subject matter to discover each time I go out to paint," she says. "My heart still races at the thought of what I'm going to find to paint that day."

A Rotating Gallery

Once she's scouted a promising spot, Monk sets up and begins work that's usually a two-day process. "I get the bulk of the painting done on the first day, and then I go back on the second day during the same time frame and weather and light conditions to finish it," she says. "I routinely have an average of seven paintings in my car so that I can continue working regardless of the conditions. This also serves as a kind of stress relief. If the day is different, and I don't

have anything I can continue with, then I just begin a new painting. It remains in my car with the others until I get a day with similar conditions that allow me to finish it. Sometimes I won't get like conditions until the following year. I really don't worry about that, though, because I have so many others I can work on.

"Fortunately, one of the best attributes of pastel is that it will look exactly the same no matter how much time passes, as long as I take care of the painting," Monk says. The artist keeps unfinished paintings in boxes in her studio to avoid dust and smears.

Simple and Direct

Monk's painting technique is simple and direct. Working on sanded pastel paper, she sketches directly on the paper to establish the composition. "Then I start painting," she says. "I typically work dark to light using soft pastels. I prefer

white paper, not toned, and I don't use fixative." Monk places the pastel with as little overlaying and blending as possible. "If I layer multiple colors, it's easy for the whole thing to turn muddy," she says. "If I don't like a color I've used, then I'll usually brush it off and replace it. I like having the light of the paper coming through the work."

Not using fixative means that the painting surface is more fragile, but Monk prefers to have the surface untouched; she finds that using a good sanded paper allows the soft pastels to stick to the surface.

The results of this approach are paintings in which the touch is direct and fresh while the tonal and color values remain rich, subtle and varied, a feat not easily achieved. In *Strange Southern Light* (below), for example, the artist deftly modulates the greens in the foreground to accommodate a variety of grasses and plants growing on the water's edge. She then shifts the

Strange Southern Light (12x24)



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color for the receding wetlands, gradually making it lighter and cooler as it begins to reflect the sky toward the horizon. The deep greens reflected in the water are less saturated and more olive. The rooftops in the distance to the right are a lighter value than the sky.

Monk's control of color and tone, along with her sensitive drawing, allows her to discover unexpected riches in what some might see as unpromising subjects. In *Broken Marsh Grass* (opposite, bottom), she concentrates on the way an area of dried grass and reeds has been flattened against a bank. She presents a wealth of information about the angles of various clumps while re-creating the subtle interplay of light and shadow. The way the dried flats move toward the horizon also is handled with considerable care; Monk follows the shifts and nuances of the color as it becomes lighter and less saturated. The range of mark-making matches the appearance of the subject with bold, clean strokes in the foreground and softer, shorter marks in the background as the space drops away.

Monk's direct technique and the demands for speed in plein air painting mean that she can be quite prolific. She recalls once making 20 paintings within a month after a last-minute invitation to have a gallery show. "I do better

under pressure," she says. "Those kinds of experiences make me grow."

An Artist's View

While her response to changing conditions can be swift, it's Monk's sensitivity and insight that make her work compelling. "So many people get up and go to work and live their busy lives and don't have time to think and look at certain things. The best thing about being an artist is that we get out to see the dawn, the sunset, the changes of the light, the beauty. I'm so happy that I stumbled upon this way of painting." 🍷

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Mary Monk (marymonk.com) was born and raised in New Orleans, La., and for the last 20 years has lived in Abita Springs, La., with her husband and four children. She studied classical drawing in high school, but is largely self-trained as a pastelist. She's an active member of the Degas Pastel Society and the Pastel Society of America. Her work can be found in many public art collections, including St. Tammany Parish and the State of Louisiana. She's represented by Lemieux Galleries, in New Orleans, and Rita Durio and Associates, in Lafayette, La.

October Marsh Grass (12x18)

Flooded Marsh Grass (opposite, top; 6x15½)

Broken Marsh Grass (opposite, bottom; 12x18)