

LISTENING TO THE LAND

THROUGH PATIENT EXPLORATION, CAREFUL RESEARCH AND AN INTUITIVE USE OF PASTEL, **KATY BAILEY** UNCOVERS THE HIDDEN HISTORIES AND EMOTIONAL CURRENTS THAT SHAPE HER DEEPLY REFLECTIVE LANDSCAPES.

By Tim Saunders

Katy Bailey likens being a landscape painter to a career as an investigative journalist. “I leave no stone unturned,” says the Cambridge, England-based artist. History is important to her, too. This immersion—and the knowledge gained from it—informs her art.

A Sense of Place

While working on her MFA, Bailey became drawn to the notion that every place has its own unique energy. “I have different ways of getting to know a location,” she says. “The first is to walk there—through all the seasons—observing, noticing changes, listening. I ask myself how it feels, and who might have walked there before me.”

The artist also searches the site for any lost or discarded objects, such as pieces of pottery, old coins, buckles—anything that might give her a sense of those who were there before. She’ll collect flowers, bark and feathers, too, sometimes bringing them back to her studio to make into something. “I like the idea of forgotten objects becoming treasures,” she says.

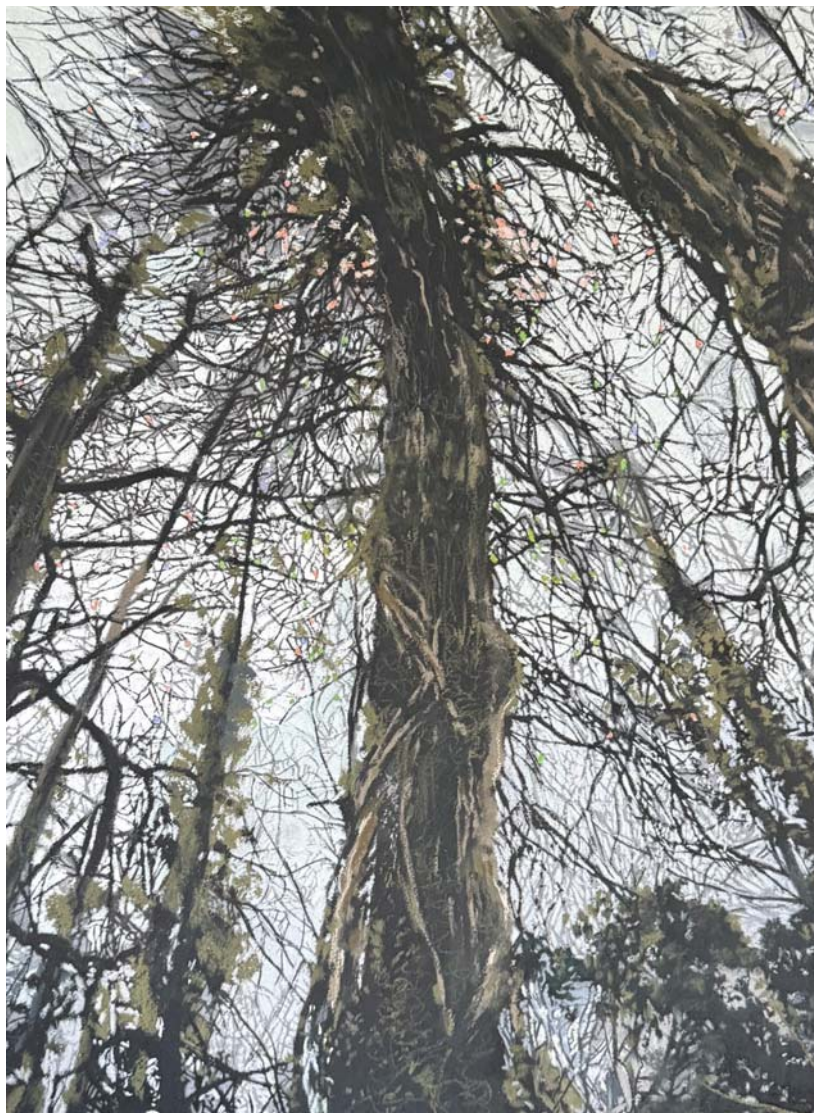
Bailey reads everything she can about the locations she paints and, if applicable, tries to find old photos of people who once lived there. “Gaining a deeper understanding of a place in this way changes the way I create,” she says. “I don’t need to be in a place to paint it; I can draw from my knowledge and feelings. I paint with a love that comes from time and a knowledge that can’t be hurried.”

This approach allows the artist to tap into the residual energy of a place and recognize subtle nuances in the landscape that she may not have seen before—not just seasonal changes, but also changes in the light and vegetation. “A slow pace allows me to absorb nature on a deeper level, becoming more mindful and observant,” she says.

“You can’t rush a relationship with a landscape,” Bailey continues. “It requires time, humility and presence. But if you give it those things, it gives you something back—a knowledge that deepens your work. Every field, river and stretch of woodland holds more stories than we could possibly know. When we return to them with colors in hand, we become a part of that story.”



Byron's Pool III (pastel on paper, 25½x19¼)



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— KATY BAILEY

ABOVE
Fingle Trees
(pastel on paper,
26¼x19¾)

RIGHT
Byron’s Pool II
(pastel on paper,
31½x45¾)

OPPOSITE
Fingle Woods
(pastel on paper,
26¼x19¾)

For Bailey, painting is as much an act of listening as seeing. “Perhaps that’s why I keep going back to the same painting spots—to listen to the elements that haven’t finished speaking to me yet,” she says. “I want viewers of my paintings to hear the same soft sound of rain that I heard, to feel the same warmth from the sun that I felt, to experience the landscape in the same way that I did, to love these places as much as I do.”

Byron’s Pool is one of the places that has a special pull for Bailey. “I’ve been painting there for more than 15 years,” she says. “Lord Byron bathed there with his pet grizzly bear while he was studying at Cambridge. And Augustus John, Gwen John and Virginia Woolf were regular visitors. It has always been an inspirational place for me because I know that the creative energy of those wonderful minds still resides there. Did they gaze at this same view? Did they touch this tree? Did they write here, draw





here and picnic here? I know, from my research, that they did—and that’s what makes it so magical.”

Bailey recalls one evening, in particular, when she was driving home at sunset. “The sky looked so spectacular,” she says, “I immediately felt the pull to turn off my usual route and head for Byron’s Pool to—hopefully—catch what was left of the sunset before it disappeared. I parked and ran, arriving at Byron’s Pool to find the water mirror still, the trees silent and brooding.”

A Creative Journey

Being encouraged to draw from a young age has given Bailey the building blocks for success. “My maternal grandparents were Dutch,” she says, “and every summer I would spend the entire school holiday in Holland. The first thing my grandmother—my Oma—always did after picking me up from the airport was take me shopping for crayons and paper. Then we’d walk to this pond in the woods where we’d sit and draw.”

The artist also fondly recalls a book her Oma had about women artists. “I remember it so clearly,” she says. “We’d look at each page and talk about the art. That same book sits on my bookshelf now.”

Bailey’s first experience of believing she could be an artist came when she was 8 years old. “A drawing I had done was held up during an assembly at primary school, and I felt so very proud,” she says.



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Flow (pastel on paper, 19¼x19¼)

Pastel has always been Bailey's medium of choice. "This was never a clear decision I made," she notes. "It's just what I've always worked with, since I was a child."

As far as Bailey is concerned, there's only one pastel brand for her: Unison. "These sticks allow me to interact directly with the surface of my paper," she says. "Just hand to color to paper—no mixing needed. They resonate with me in my passion for sustainability and the natural world because they're made from natural pigments. They never crumble or break, even down to the smallest piece. It feels like a complete circle; the pigments come from nature, and that's what I am painting."

The artist's preferred surface is Giant Hoxton watercolor paper. "It comes in huge 78x60-inch sheets," she says. "I prefer not to be constrained by paper size, so I cut my sheets according to the work I'm doing. I usually cover the paper surface with an acrylic wash of pale ochre before I start drawing."

When studying art in college, Bailey did experiment with various media, including lithography, painting, printing, charcoal and pastel. "I found that the immediacy of charcoal and pastel worked best for me," she says. "I don't like mixing colors, but I love the flow of hand to paper that you get with pastel. It feels very natural."

After finishing art college, Bailey initially painted a lot of nudes. "The life-drawing room had been my favorite place on my college campus," she says. Although figure-drawing continues to be a part of her practice, her focus has shifted, over the last decade, to landscape—with particular emphasis on woodlands and water reflections. "I'm very drawn to big skies, stormy skies and racing clouds," she continues. "Where I live, the landscape is very flat, so there are big vistas and skies."

A Mindful Process

Bailey divides her time between her art (three days a week) and her work as a psychotherapist—a combination she loves. Although it can get a bit solitary at times, she maintains a network of artist friends to sketch with and share ideas.

On painting days, Bailey often starts her morning by going for a walk, during which she absorbs as much of the landscape as she can. "There are a lot of beautiful and inspiring woodlands near me," she says. "As I walk, I mentally set my intention for the day and decide which part of a painting I want to focus on when



ABOVE
Lost II
(pastel
on paper,
26½x19¼)



LEFT
Rain
(pastel
on paper,
26½x19¼)

I get back to my studio. Then I paint quite intensely until early afternoon, occasionally taking short walks around my garden here and there.”

Bailey works on one piece at a time and likes to position an in-progress work so that she can see it when she walks past her studio. “Quite often, glaring errors will jump out at me that way,” she notes.

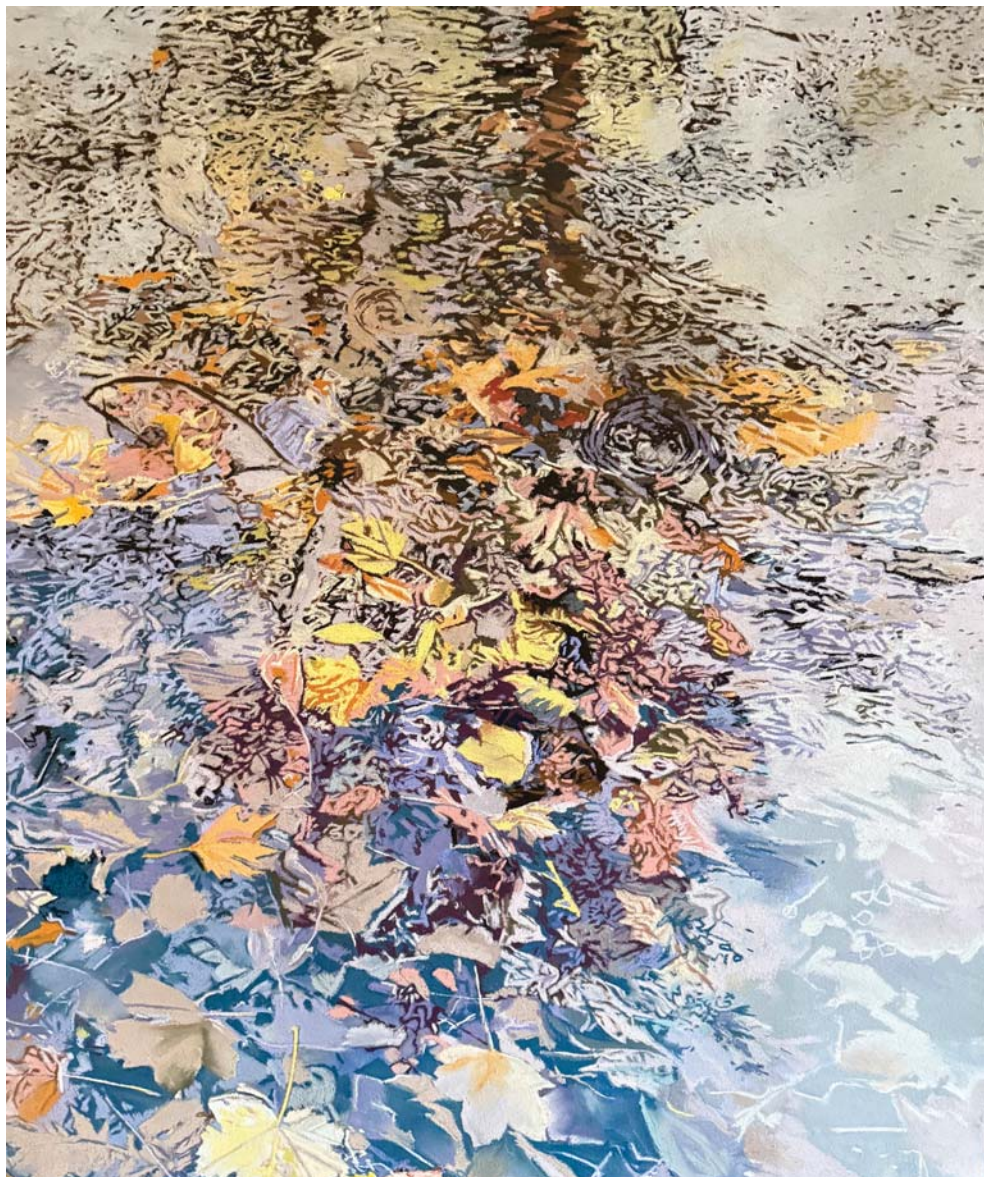
Although she enjoys these creative routines, a recent house move

has introduced some disorder into the artist’s life. “It has taken me a while to get my studio set back up the way I like it,” she says. “In my old studio, I’d tape large sheets of paper to the wall and work that way. I have just done the same in this studio and am really looking forward to working large again.”

Bailey works on an easel when using standard-sized paper and, when it comes to colors, she’s drawn

to earthy tones. “I’m not mad on purple,” she says.

While the artist does take photos on her smart phone to use as reference in the studio, she mostly relies on memory and feeling. She also points out that working in silence helps her creativity. “I think it’s because there isn’t much silence in my other job,” she says, “so I treasure it wherever I can find it. Music and chatter are too distracting when I’m painting. I like to



Immersion (pastel on paper, 47¼x35½) is the newest work in Soukup’s “Reflections” series, which she started in 2017. “I was walking with a friend along the river near Jesus College, in Cambridge,” the artist recalls. “Alongside the perimeter of the college is a ditch. My friend stopped to take photos, but I couldn’t see what he was seeing. It looked like a muddy ditch to me. Then he showed me his photo; suddenly I saw layers, colors, depth, reflections. I realized that it’s not *what* we see but *how* we see it—a metaphor for life in a way. As a psychotherapist, the layers of dark and light, color and reflection appealed to me. After, I couldn’t stop seeing those dualities in all muddy puddles, ditches, ponds, rivers—it became a beautiful obsession.”

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get into a good flow where time almost seems to stop. It's very meditative and mindful."

A Turning Point

Until 10 years ago, Bailey painted commissions. "I did a lot of figurative work back then and received a lot of portrait requests," she says. "I found it difficult, though, when people asked me to cosmetically enhance their likeness, such as eliminating tattoos, making them slimmer or giving them thicker hair."

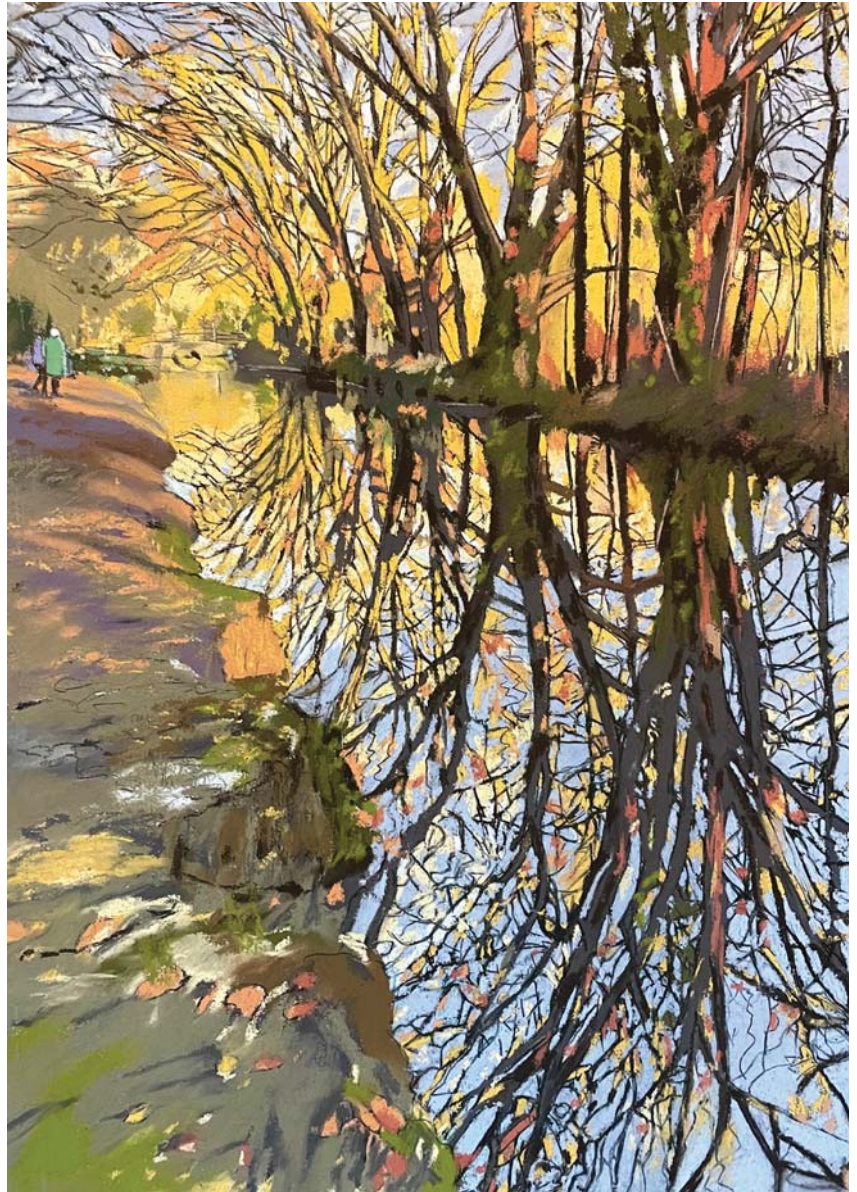
One of the strangest requests Bailey received was from a client who wanted to be painted holding a fish and wearing only a pair of Wellington boots. "I did the painting, but it was a turning point for me," she says. Without creative control, she felt these works lacked authenticity, so that was the last commission she did.

Bailey also taught an evening life-drawing class at a local art center for about four years, which she found much more fulfilling. "I enjoyed it so much," she says, "that I was inspired to start hosting plein air classes in my garden with two live models posing under the trees. It was very popular. When we transitioned into winter, I moved the class indoors, in front of my fireplace."

In 2018, Bailey experienced the pleasure of having her work accepted into the Pastel Society UK's annual exhibition. It was a notable moment for the artist—to think of the many artists who have figured into the Society's 127-year-long history and to be part of that. "I was overcome by a feeling of awe," she says.

Finding herself turning again to familiar subjects, the artist is currently working on a new series of reflection paintings. "I never feel like I'm completely done with a subject," says Bailey. "There's always more to see or a new way of seeing—different lighting, a shift in perspective, a change of palette, even fresh knowledge."

Tim Saunders (tasaunders.weebly.com) is the publisher of *Contemporary Artist* and hosts the *In Conversation* podcast. He's a photographer and a painter who produces naive oil works under his nom de plume, Ted Wates.



OPPOSITE **Reflection**
(pastel on paper, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$)

ABOVE **Walk to the Mill**
(pastel on paper, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$)



English artist **Katy Bailey** (katybailey.co.uk) studied graphics and illustration at the Cambridge School of Art, from 1978 to 1982, and earned her MFA in 2019. She's a Member of the Pastel Society, U.K., and the Cambridge Drawing Society. Nature is a major source of inspiration for the artist, who continually explores new ways of relating to the natural landscape and weaving an elaborate dialogue with nature.