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1 Tangled Up in Blue II's title references a Bob Dylan song

2 Michele relaxes in her home studio in Rehoboth, MA

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IN THE STUDIO

# Michele Poirier-Mozzone

The American artist behind a series of mesmerising underwater paintings talks to **REBECCA BRADBURY** about the joy of finding the perfect subject and the perils of pool photography

Have you ever stopped to wonder what water means to you? Maybe it evokes memories of summers spent by the sea. Perhaps its unpredictable ebbs and flows induces a fearsome awe. Or an immense gratitude for its restorative powers could come to mind.

According to Michele Poirier-Mozzone – for whom water represents life and the passing of time – the interest is universal, but the reasons are unique. And after nine years of

depicting the element in pastel and oil for her in-demand *Fractured Light* series, the Massachusetts-based artist can be considered an authority on the element.

"Water means so many different things to different people," she explains, putting the success of her underwater paintings down to the subject's ubiquitous appeal.

Yet this modest reasoning gives little credit to her keen eye for colour, compositional finesse and expressive mark making, which balances

wonderfully between abstraction and realism. With vivacious, joyful hues (including a seemingly never-ending spectrum of blues), iridescent clusters of bubbles, and ripples of water so magical they move, not to mention the hypnotic distortion of the human form, the resulting artworks are impossible to take your eyes off.

The idea for the series came about one summer afternoon, back in 2012, while Michele watched her youngest daughter play in the pool in their backyard. "It was late in the day >



*It's worth taking the time to determine what I want to say... I can be freer to paint if I've done my homework first*



and the sun was casting these ribbons of light down through the water onto her and she was all distorted," recalls the artist. "It was one of those moments of realisation that she was growing and changing more quickly than I often notice."

This would be a turning point for the artist. After graduating with a fine art degree from Boston's Emmanuel College in 1986, Michele continued to paint as a hobby while raising her young family. Around 12 years ago, with more spare time on her hands, she began to take art more seriously again. The only problem was finding a subject matter that she could transform into a series – until that fateful afternoon in her garden.

Now Michele is a full-time artist, continuing to work on the *Fractured Light* series from her home studio in Rehoboth, a town located 50 miles south of Boston. The pool remains in place and her (now grown-up) children continue as her models, yet her method of acquiring the reference material has adapted over the years.

"I started off using a regular camera from above the water," she explains. "Then I put my cell phone in a waterproof case and tried to take photos, but that was very disappointing. The results were not good at all. Then I got a GoPro [waterproof action camera], and I can actually put the camera underwater at all different angles."

"I don't know what I'm taking until I upload it onto my computer," she adds. "It takes a lot of footage to get that one particular shot that can make a good composition and a powerful painting, but the GoPro has really opened up the world to me underwater."

Once uploaded, Michele will sift through the footage frame by frame on the hunt for the perfect shot. >



After this, she tends to use the digital illustration app Procreate on her iPad to experiment with the layout and colour palette.

This is a key part of the process for Michele: "I feel it's worth taking the time to determine what exactly I want to say and how I want to say it. I can be freer as I start to paint if I've done my homework first."

This inclination for a looser approach is, in fact, one of the main reasons the subject initially stood out. As light is refracted through the water, warping the way objects and their reflections appear, there is a lot of scope for abandoning the rules of realism. "It's part of that abstraction process I really enjoy," she says of depicting these bodily distortions. "I like the figure, but I don't like getting too tight, so the distorted part of the piece is the really fun, icing on

the cake as I get to play with colour and shapes and manipulate the composition to move the eye around [the painting]."

The chance to experiment with colour is another major draw. No two paintings in the series contain the same combinations or mixes, as Michele strives to switch it up each time. And despite the multitude of blues in her final works, the artist achieves this with just three go-to pigments – Phthalo, Ultramarine and Prussian Blues – as well as a much-loved Cobalt Turquoise.

There is, of course, the vibrant swimwear too – a colour choice the artist often delays: "I tend to hold off a little while before I decide what colour I pop into the swimsuit, as it's whatever I need in that composition. Sometimes I'll try three or four different colours for a swimsuit

3 The colours are planned on an iPad first for work like *Stretch*

4 Cobalt Turquoise was a favourite for *Purify*

and then come upon something that really works."

A similar trial-and-error approach is involved when depicting the play of light, whether it's reflecting off the water's mutating surface, illuminating the pool's hidden depths, or casting otherworldly blue patterns. The ephemeral effect that ensues makes this probably the hardest element to replicate. Michele recommends laying down the darks first, the mid-tones second and leaving the lightest lights until the very end, although she admits that this process can't always be relied upon.

"I don't have a formula," she says. "Sometimes I really struggle achieving that look of glow and light, and other times it just seems to evolve as the painting evolves and I don't have to do much apart from lighten it up and then it's done."

The theme of transformation is always near, not least in how the series has developed since its inception. In line with Michele's own goals, she's now at ease with the looseness she once coveted, adding in lost edges and leaving parts of the underpainting showing through. The motivation – originally the >





5 Michele takes reference photos on her GoPro camera

6 Sunflower is part of the *Fractured Light* series of works



depiction of her three girls – has also shifted. It's now less about the personal, as she seeks to confront a more universal human experience. But the biggest change has to be swapping pastels for oil paints.

Working in a new medium for the past four years has added a whole other dimension – literally – as the artist can now work on a much larger scale. "If you're holding a small pastel, you can't get a big, wide swathe of colour as easily as you can with a big palette knife or brush," she says. "I've been loving going bigger and just having fun with layering on the paint, like icing a cake. It's just added a different element to the series for me."

It wasn't a totally smooth substitution, however. The aim was to achieve an element of continuity in the series but replicating the same

effect in oil paint proved harder than anticipated. The best method was eventually discovered as simply copying her previous steps. So just as Michele begins a pastel artwork by laying down a red underpainting, she opts for the same hue when working in oil paint. The next step is to then put her chosen blue mix into action and so on, ensuring there is a harmony to the series and, at times, making it difficult to detect what medium has been used.

Having made these transitions, the burning question is where will

*I don't see myself getting more representational... If anything, I would go a bit more abstract*

*Fractured Light* go next? "I certainly don't see myself getting more representational," she replies. "If anything, I think I would go a little bit looser, a little bit more abstract."

But the most pressing concern is that now her daughters have grown up and aren't around so much, the artist is running extremely low on reference material. Let's hope they return home soon for a photoshoot so we can enjoy more of Michele's uplifting, optimistic and ever-engaging underwater artworks.

[www.poirier-mozzone.com](http://www.poirier-mozzone.com)