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Balancing Realism  
and Abstraction with

# MICHELE POIRIER MOZZONE

DISPLAY UNTIL 9/28/16

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## Laura Thompson identifies the why & how of painting



Michele Poirier Mozzone

## Mixing Realism and Abstraction

Michele Poirier Mozzone's series of underwater figures melds two styles through sunlight rays and water distortion

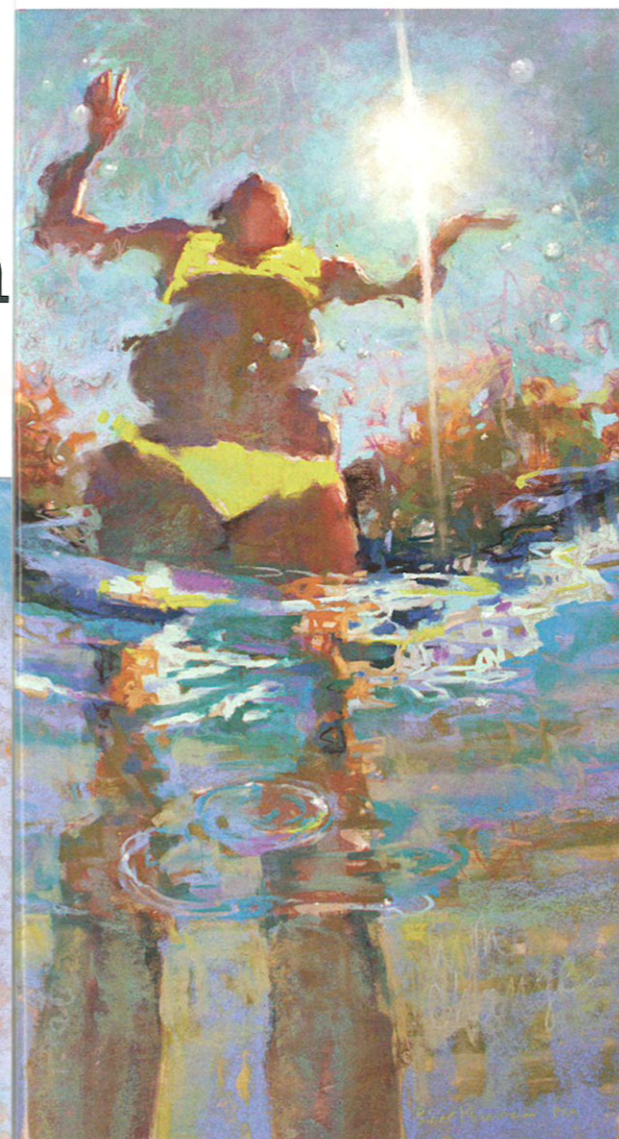
Walking the line between realism and abstraction intrigues me in my series of underwater figurative paintings titled *Fractured Light*. Watercolor was my medium of choice for many years after earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts in college. My paintings were controlled and rather tight—mostly still life and florals. Painting lost its appeal for me after a while and I began to move away from art and into other creative avenues. Six years ago, I tried soft pastel, took some excellent workshops and began to have fun again! When I found I could combine my first love, watercolor, with the expressiveness and immediacy of pastel, I was completely hooked!

The last few years have been an intensely focused period of creative rebirth for me. I have pushed myself to experiment with the medium and my process. Shortly after I started using pastel, I decided my creativity needed a kick in the pants, so for a few months I painted completely abstract works without any planning—just free-flow abstraction. It was one of the most difficult, frustrating periods for me. Besides a new appreciation for good abstract art, I came away with many mediocre paintings and a feeling that maybe this was a waste of time. I still hadn't hit upon anything that I felt could lead me into a series of successful paintings I was in a creative rut.

One exceptionally beautiful afternoon at the pool in 2011, I was struck by the ribbons

*These Changes 5*, pastel, 26 x 16" (66 x 41 cm)

This painting was awarded First Prize at the Providence Art Club's 2016 *Members' Exhibition*. It was important to me to achieve that strong sunlight shining down on this figure. Much of the initial writing/scribbling stage is evident in this one.



*These Changes 4*, pastel, 26 x 16" (66 x 41 cm)

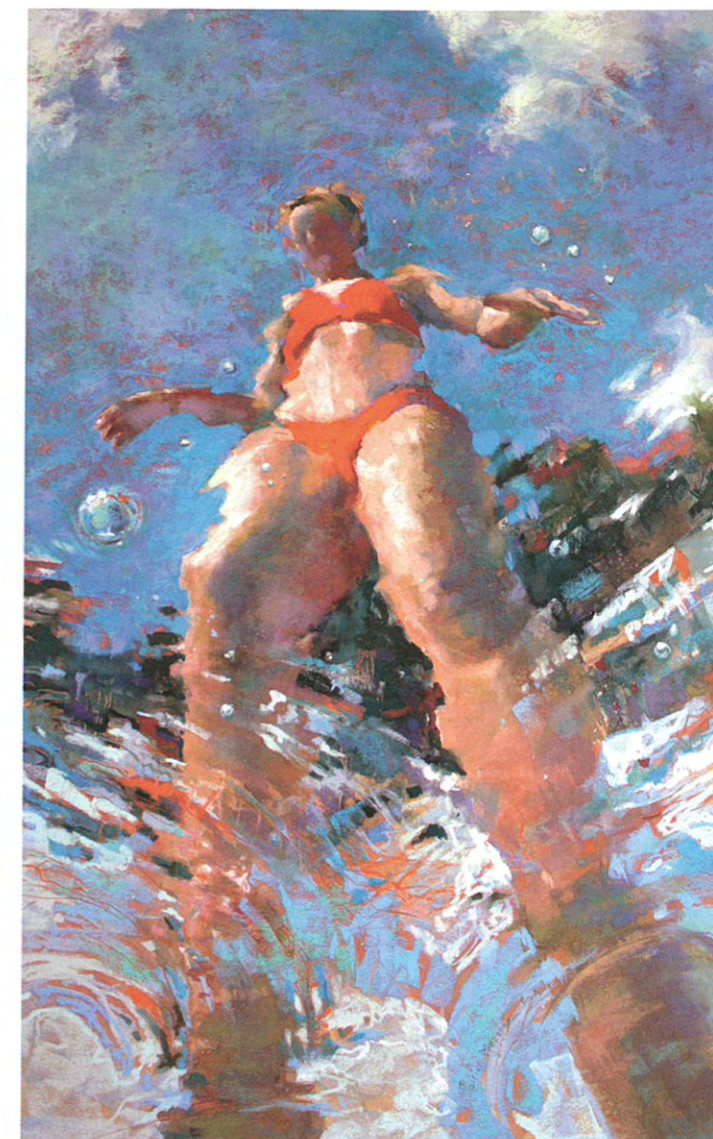
This series of tall paintings, titled *These Changes*, feature a female figure as she is distorted through moving water—a metaphor here for distorted body image issues and the effects of the passage of time. I had plenty to write with my pastel pencils on these!

of sunlight and interesting distortions affecting my daughter through the moving water. I was also keenly aware of catching this lovely, brief moment with her before it flickered by. I grabbed my camera and took numerous photos of her in the water in hopes of using them in a painting. Then it hit me—what if I tried to incorporate an image of the figure in water into my abstract paintings?

That was the beginning of an exploration that still fascinates me today. I no longer use old abstract paintings as a base, but those early pieces taught me that I am drawn to

abstract passages of color and texture alongside gestural representation. I enjoy intuitively exploring patterns, mark making and the interplay of colors, but I also love painting the figure. For me, this series is a metaphor for the passing of time. Water is the vehicle for transformation, cleansing, renewal and change while thoughts, aspirations and energy emanate as bubbles and rise to meet the outside world. Each figure is captured reacting to a moment in this altered, weightless state.

My working process for *Alliance*, like all my paintings, starts with composition. I work



*New Direction*, pastel, 26 x 16" (66 x 41 cm)

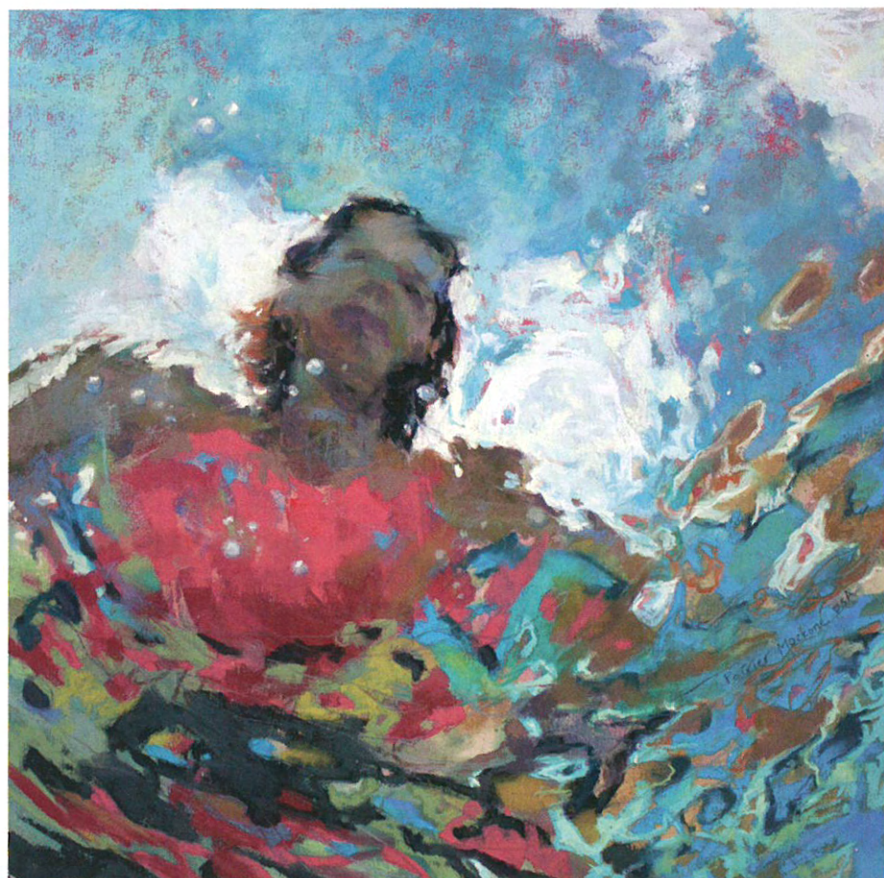
This must be what a sand crab's-eye view is like! From just below the surface of shallow water, I played with patterns of ripples and a complementary palette. I enjoyed the exaggerated perspective of this one.

out any design problems and composition with a thumbnail sketch done in black ballpoint pen in my sketchbook. If the painting will be large or is a new subject for me, I will do a small color study as well. These are crucial steps that need not take a lot of time. I have found that planning out my composition, values and general color palette allows me to be more confident, take more risks and trust my intuition when I begin the actual painting—even if that means making changes along the way.

I lightly sketch the composition onto my

*Effervescence*, pastel, 9 x 9" (23 x 23 cm)  
 I tried for a dynamic composition here. It was risky to crop the arms and legs off so abruptly, but it really is about those luminous bubbles and warm lights/cool shadows.

sanded pastel paper using pastel pencils. Accurate drawing is crucial when working with the figure so I am careful to check proportions. I begin with a light wash of oil paint thinned with odorless turpenoid and choose colors I think would be beautiful showing through the pastel. (Not all pastel papers can take a wet application. Check before you wet!) I have no secret formula for choosing underpainting colors. Sometimes it is fun to work with complementary colors; other times I paint in analogous or local color. It is trial and error in finding out what works best. My only rule for underpainting is to try to achieve values that are similar to those in the finished painting. In other words, colors



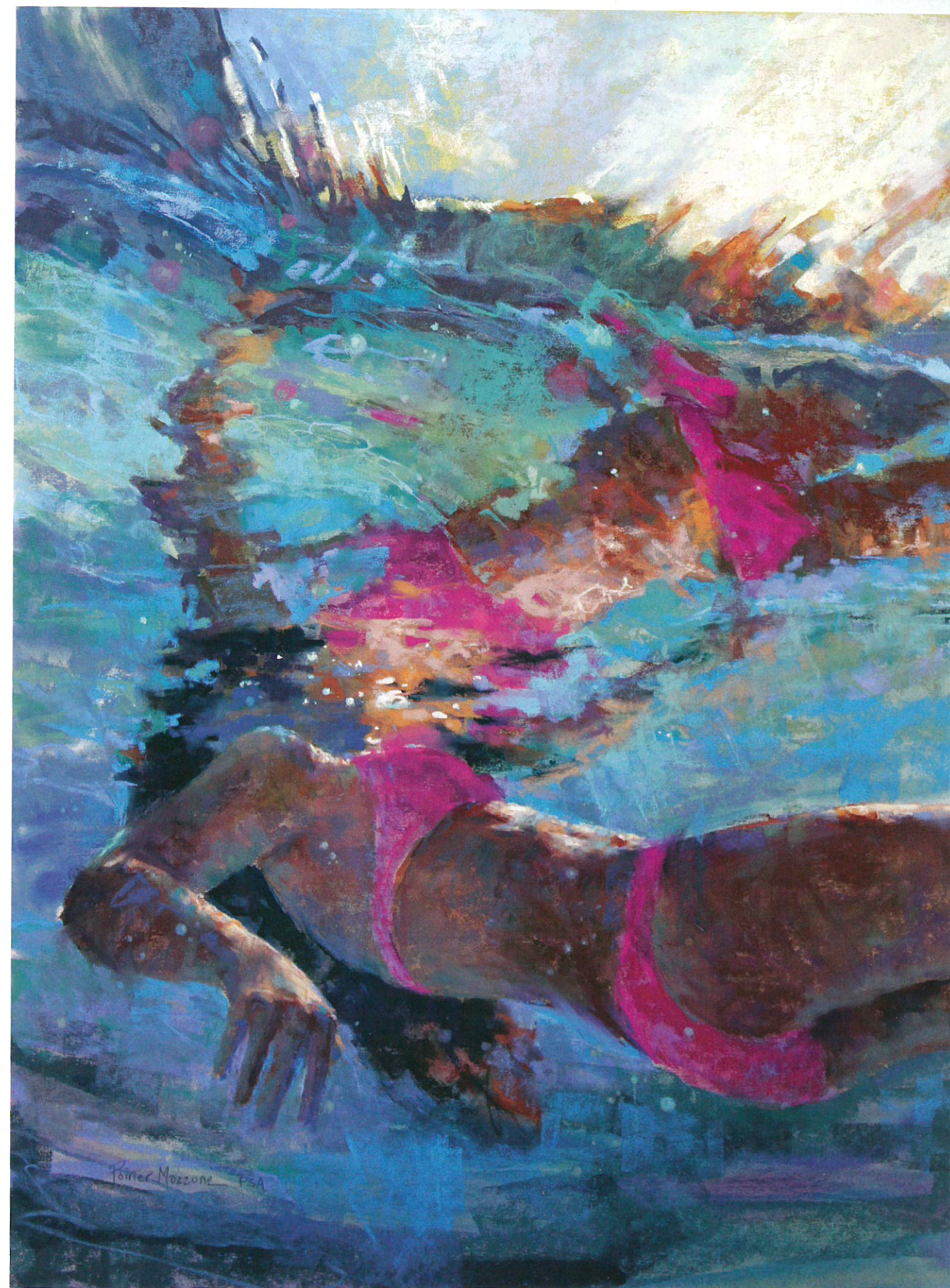
*Aura II*, pastel, 12 x 12" (30 x 30 cm)  
 It was fun to try to capture the fantastic distortions of form and color while photographing myself up through turbulent water.

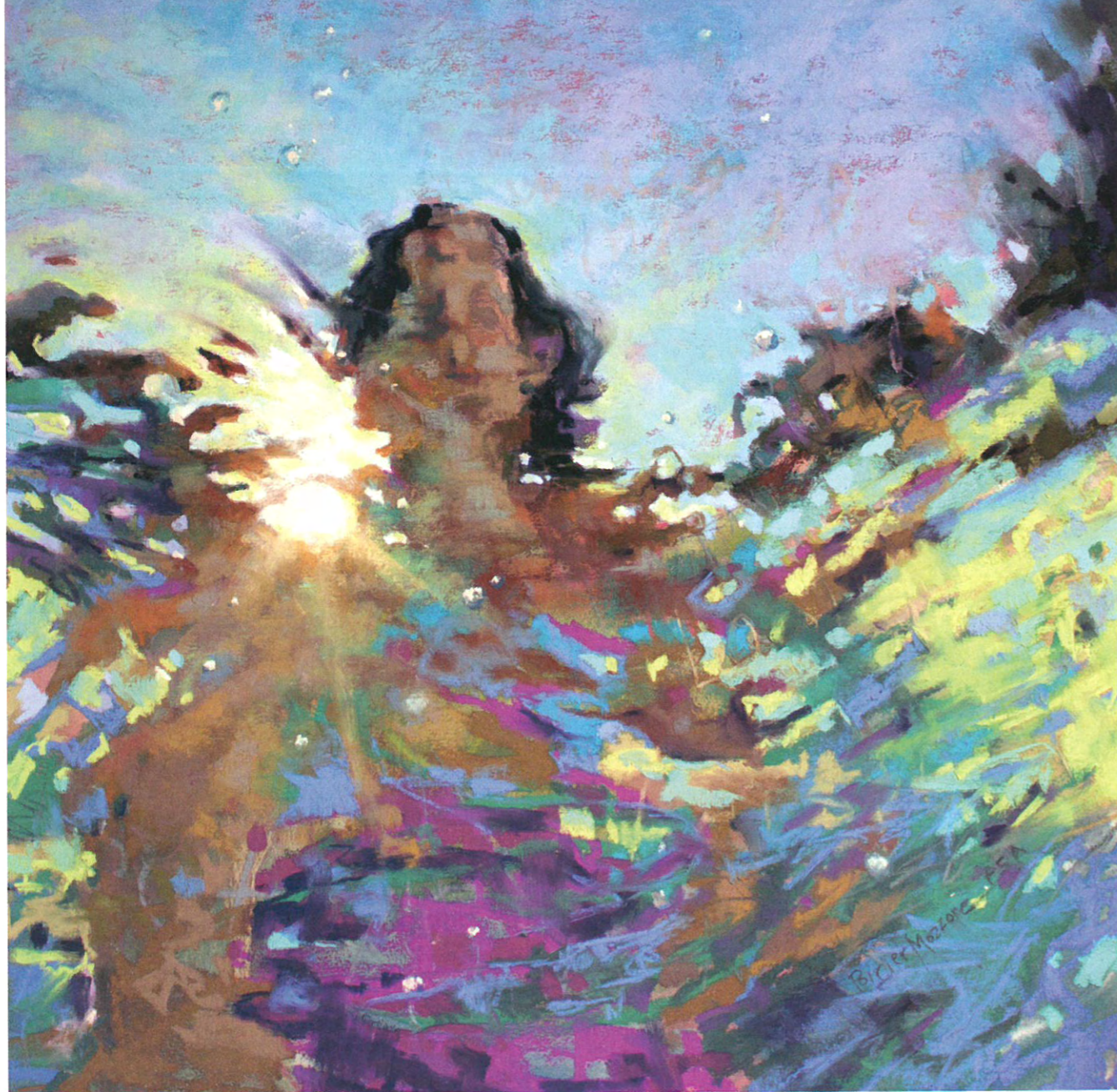
don't matter as much as keeping darks, mid-tones and lights accurate in the underpainting.

Once the oil wash is dry, I begin adding light layers of pastel with broad, gestural strokes. I have also started to use pastel pencils in this stage to scribble and write words and phrases that I am thinking about as I paint. They are thoughts and words that relate to the painting. Much of this graffiti will eventually be covered up, but leaving some of it adds an interesting, playful element to the piece. I continue blocking in the big shapes with swaths of pastel, avoiding detail and striving for accurate value to create a sense of light shining through the water and onto the figures. As I work, I decide to alter my palette from the original color study to add more dramatic lighting and attention on my focal point—the figure now in red.

I play up the color and value contrasts around her. Skin tone underwater can range from golden to turquoise blue. I find that

Opposite: *Reminiscence*, pastel, 24 x 18" (61 x 46 cm)  
 To me, the amazing circular reflections above the figure bring to mind thoughts and experiences of the past. I know it may not be immediately obvious what the perspective is here. The reflections that happen just below the surface of the water are stunningly beautiful and bizarre!





*Realization*, pastel, 12 x 12" (30 x 30 cm)

This was the first in a series of "selfie" paintings from below the water surface looking up. It was a good excuse to get loose with abstract passages of color and movement. I love how the rays of sun add sparkle and life.

gradually building up layers of warms and cools in the skin looks most realistic. Details can now come into focus. The color of the pool floor is problematic for me. I have a difficult time resolving just how dark and grayed-down to go with it while not losing the figures in it. A mingling of purple, gray-blue and green does the trick and warming up the edges of sunlight on the floor with greenish-yellow gives it a nice glow.

The final stage of a painting always gets nitpicky and it is sometimes hard to know when to stop, put down the pastel and walk away. In this painting, my final steps are to restate some of the darks, echo the colors up through the reflection and add more sparkle to the bubbles. I feel I have accomplished what I wanted to say with this painting and even though some areas are not fully rendered, further tinkering

would not make it any more successful.

Rediscovering my love of art over the last few years has been such a gift. My advice for someone on their own journey—whether getting back into art or developing a new interest—would be to get out of your comfort zone and try new things. Frustrating as it may be, you may find, as I did, that it will take your work to the next level and provide a new path of creative exploration! 🎨

## My Art in the Making Alliance

### WHAT THE ARTIST USED

#### Support

- » UArt 400 grit sanded pastel paper

#### Brushes

- » Various old bristle brushes for the underpainting, as sanded paper will ruin nice brushes.

#### Oil paint colors

- » Cadmium yellow medium
- » Quinacridone red
- » Turquoise
- » Ultramarine blue
- » White
- » Yellow ochre

#### Assorted soft pastels including those manufactured by

- » Terry Ludwig
- » Prismacolor Nupastel
- » Girault Pastels
- » Great American ART WORKS
- » Unison
- » Mount Vision
- » Pastel Company
- » Schmincke

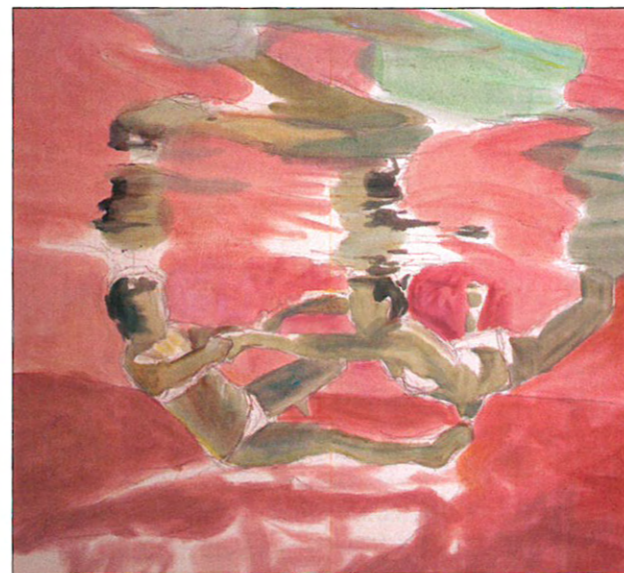
#### Other materials

- » Odorless turpenoid
- » Pastel pencils
- » Sketchbook
- » Black ballpoint pen



#### PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

With photo references, I plan the composition by cropping, using thumbnail sketches and sometimes a small color study. All this preparation gives me confidence to take chances and work more intuitively once I begin the painting.



#### STAGE 1 ACCURATE DRAWING AND AN UNDERPAINTING

The image is sketched lightly, then I use an oil wash under painting, keeping values fairly accurate. No formula here—I simply choose colors I imagine would be beautiful showing through the pastel.



#### STAGE 2 KEEP IT LIGHT AND LOOSE

Initial pastel layers are light and gestural while trying to maintain values. I write words/phrases that come to me about this piece as I paint, keeping it playful and loose. I decide to alter my palette from the preliminary study to achieve more drama.

Continued ▶



**STAGE 3**  
**REFINEMENT OF FOCAL POINT AND COLOR INTENSITY**  
 I begin to refine contrast and detail in and around my focal point (the figure in red), making a choice to darken the pool floor for a greater sense of sunlight.



**STAGE 4 BUILDING UP LAYERS OF COLOR**  
 I add greens and blues to skin tone for that underwater reflected light, letting them mingle with previous layers of warm color. I add blue, but am still not happy with the pool floor—too vivid.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Massachusetts artist, Michele Poirier Mozzone, is a juried Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America (PSA), a Master Circle honoree in the International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS/MC), and a Signature Member of both the Connecticut Pastel Society and the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod. She is also an artist member of the Providence Art Club. She was awarded a four-year art scholarship to Emmanuel College in Boston where she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts.

Her work has received numerous awards in local and national juried competitions including Best of Show in the 2014 national exhibition of the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod and Best of Show in the Connecticut Pastel Society's 2014 national exhibition. She was recently honored to have her work published in *40 Maitres du Pastel, Le Livre 2016*, a French art book by Pratique Des Arts. Her painting, *The Silent Game*, was featured in the August/September 2014 issue of *International Artist* magazine as a finalist in the figurative competition. Her works have been exhibited in the Pastel Society of America's national juried exhibitions at the National Arts Club in New York City and IAPS exhibitions online (First Place 2012), at Vose Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts, and the Salmagundi Club, New York City.

A popular instructor of adult art classes, she teaches watercolor and pastel painting at the Providence Art Club and throughout southeastern Massachusetts.

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

**Represented by:**  
 » **Gallery Artrio**, Hyannis, Massachusetts, USA,  
[www.galleryartrio.com](http://www.galleryartrio.com)



## STAGE 5 FINISHING TOUCHES

*Alliance*, soft pastel, 23 x 26" (58 x 66 cm)

The addition of yellow-green to the pool floor has softened the effect and added a warm glow. I echo colors in the reflection, strengthen the sparkling lights and darkest darks and am happy with the overall effect.