

IMAGINING COLOR

DUTCH ARTIST **LOES BOTMAN** RECENTLY CELEBRATED HER 50TH BIRTHDAY AND HER 25TH YEAR AS AN ARTIST BY MOUNTING AN EXHIBITION OF 300 PASTEL PAINTINGS.

By Enid Wood

When asked to describe what it is about pastel that draws her to it, Loes Botman says simply, “The colors.” She continues, “When I was about 11-years-old, I got my first box of Rembrandt pastels from my mother for my birthday, but when I was at the Art Academy we had to paint with oil and acrylic. I didn’t like it, but pastels weren’t common and were almost taboo. The teachers didn’t want to teach me how to draw with them. In the last year of school, when I had to prepare for the exam, I made my own pastels and made drawings about 21-square-foot large.” Botman remembers needing to stand on a ladder in order to complete them. She decided to focus on pastels after her time at the Academy ended.

The artist had very few pastels and very little money when a retired Dutch artist telephoned to ask whether she wanted to

buy her pastels. “You would have to come now,” she said. Botman told the woman that she’d come on her bicycle, but the woman insisted that she bring a car. Botman didn’t have a car, so she brought her husband, who also rode a bicycle. The pair wrapped the woman’s pastels carefully into large parcels. When the woman declared that she’d walk them to their car, Botman and her husband improvised by leaning on a parked car and fumbling in their pockets for their “car keys.” Fortunately, it started raining, and the woman rushed indoors, leaving Botman and her husband to cycle home with the precious Unison pastels in the rain. Botman remembers unwrapping them when she got home. “It was magical to see those pastels.”

The artist believes that feeling grateful produces positive results in our lives. When she looked at her newly acquired pastels, nestled in wooden boxes that her husband



Coming Into The Night (21½x15½)

had made from discarded school tables, she felt rich. Just then the phone rang. It was a representative from a wallpaper manufacturer. “Do you have a lot of pastels?” he asked. “Yes, I do,” Botman answered. The wallpaper company sent a photographer to photograph the pastel sticks, and later produced a roll of wallpaper, featuring the pastels, a little larger than life size, without a single color repeated.

Making Time

Botman’s first child, a daughter, was born shortly after she finished studying at the Art Academy in The Hague. Living in the city and homesick for the countryside, where she was raised, the artist took her baby to seek out nature in the city gardens. She traveled with a bag of pastels on one side of the baby carriage and a bag of paper on the other. While her daughter slept, she drew birds that visited the gardens. When her son was born, two years later, she discovered that one child could amuse the other. Eventually she could go outside to draw birds and farm



Botman stands in front of the wallpaper inspired by her own vast collection of pastel sticks, partly inherited from a generous and ageing artist.

RIGHT
Rooney (31½x27½)

BELOW
Living in the Woods (31½x39½)



animals alongside her children, while they played on the swings. She engaged them by asking, “What am I drawing?” After about two hours, her children would ask when she was going to draw the eyes, knowing that she always saved the eyes for last in an animal portrait.

A typical day for the artist begins with breakfast at 6:30 a.m. Afterwards, she checks her email. By 8:30 she’s in her studio in the attic, a bright room lit with skylights, clerestory windows and lamps for making art videos. At 3:30 she stops painting to do the shopping and cooking, and

then she’s back at her computer in the evening after dinner. Afterward, she relaxes with needlepoint.

Color Conversations

Botman teaches workshops and art lessons to groups of students as small



as four and as large as 25, with the smaller ones occurring weekly and the larger ones up to four times per year. “People in the Netherlands take a lot of workshops,” she says. She travels to them by train with a suitcase of pastels. Her teaching method doesn’t vary much from her normal working process at home in her studio. She chooses not to begin with thumbnail sketches. “I’m a lazy one,” Botman says laughing. Instead she chooses to emphasize the importance of picking a subject. “When I draw a goose, I want to be a goose.” This can change during the course of a painting, however. “If I don’t feel like being a goose today, maybe I want to be a cow.” Either way, Botman ensures her painted animals “move” around the composition.

ABOVE
Visiting the
Neighbours
(15⁷/_sx15⁷/_s)

OPPOSITE TOP
Sleep Tight, Dream
Softly (15⁷/_sx22)

She occasionally stands back to look at her work. “It may look stiff,” says the artist. “I play with it. It’s like a dance. I feel free to change the colors or change the composition. I start with my feeling for a color. If I feel angry, it might be red; if I feel sad, it may be blue.”

She instructs her pupils to do likewise: “Start with the color you want. Take a second color with it—maybe not your favorite, maybe not even one you like. Choose one you hate. Make



them have a conversation with each other.” Each participant in the class then draws the same bird in a color field of their choosing with charcoal.

Botman begins with charcoal, appreciating its flexibility, with marks that can more easily be changed than black pastel. “Wipe it out if you don’t like it,” she says. It’s her mantra. If students struggle, she paints a demonstration with tips like this one: “It’s important not to put in the eyes too early, because then it’s too easy to lose the range of values and the composition.”

Botman keeps the contours loose when drawing animals because they may change. “Feel the length of its tail. Where are his eyes?” Then, she starts to fill in the colors. Her color advice? “Always be very playful.”

Next Steps

Botman had been working [in this size], but her galleries eventually began asking the artist for larger work. She initially resisted, since she transports her paintings by bicycle. Determined to solve this dilemma, she began to experiment with varnishes, enabling her to frame paintings without glass. “My method is secret,” she says, but the artist did confess that her first eight attempts resulted in ruined paintings, which ended up in the garbage. She says the process goes something like this: First she prepares a wooden cradle for the painting, into which she inserts a plywood panel. Then she applies many coats of gesso and pastel primer, which she smooths with a rotary sander. She’s careful to keep her paintings light in value, so that the fixative and varnish she applies when the paintings are completed will not darken the colors too much. Botman makes most of her own frames, although she often uses Hahnemüle paper or Sennelier La Carte, and then puts the paintings in commercial frames.

Galleries aren’t the only ones demanding more from Botman. A friend created a picture book of the artist’s animal paintings for her



Botman doesn’t own a car which can make transporting artwork tricky. In a quintessentially Dutch move, she develops clever systems for carrying her paintings (of all sizes) on her bike.

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grandchild and liked the result so much that she showed it to a publisher, who liked it too. Now, Botman has published a number of children’s books in both Dutch and English. In 2018, she published a volume in Dutch and English for adults called *Still Lives*.

When Botman takes on an animal subject, she paints from life, talking to the animals. “I ask them to sit in silence so I can draw them,” she confides. She also possesses an extraordinary visual memory. “Almost all of my animal paintings are memories from childhood.” The

ABOVE
Work Is Done
(47½x59)

OPPOSITE TOP
In the Morning
(27⅓x47⅓)

artist will use photos for reference, but only when she takes on commissioned work as she says there’s less freedom to be had in the creation of those paintings. She often visits the collector’s home and observes the colors in which they like to live. “As I paint, I’m thinking about the words they say and the feelings they describe, repeatedly. It stays in my



mind. It’s the only thing I think about.” Many of the commissioned paintings are portraits of beloved family pets that have died. Much satisfaction comes from producing a painting that brings the animal to life again for the people who had loved him or her.

Renewal

In [this year], Botman suffered a health crisis, undergoing major surgery. Afterward, Botman’s painting philosophy changed. She says, “A painting of geese isn’t just geese. It’s life that you see. Without animals around me, I wouldn’t have an existence.” She emphasizes that this existence is molded by her own choices, as is everyone’s. “Everything you make is your decision. Your life is like a picture. You create your own world in a drawing, just like you create your own life.” She reminds her students, “Be proud of your own work and of your life. You can always start over ... in your drawing and in your life.” *PJ*

Enid Wood, of Texas, is an artist, teacher, writer and violinist.



Loes Botman (loesbotman.com) completed training at the Royal Art Academy in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1994. She’s been an artist her whole life, but recently celebrated her 25th jubilee as a professional artist. Her work has been shown in 200 exhibitions in the Netherlands and abroad. She teaches workshops. Her work has been featured in children books, art books and illustrational poetry bundles. Botman regularly writes articles for French, German and Dutch magazines. She’s in the jury of the Dutch competition, “Drawing of the Year,” and is a member of the Austin Pastel Society. The artist will be attending IAPS 2019, where she’ll be giving several demos. She wishes to continue as an artist for many years to come in order to make the world a more colorful and better place.