

# REDEFINING LANDSCAPES



MAGENTA DAYDREAM

the art of Debra Van Tuinen

BY ALYSSA ROSSO  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEBI BODETT

A few steps away from the sights, sounds, smells, and colors of the Olympia Farmer's Market, Debra Van Tuinen has created an oasis. Her modest storefront serves as both gallery and workshop, the sharp odor of paints and melted wax greeting visitors at the door while the paint-speckled cement floor underfoot offers a clue to the creative process in action behind the scenes.

Carefully hidden behind a large divider is Van Tuinen's workspace. Inside, a dozen circular pans rest on a cooled hotplate with paintbrushes at the ready. Solidified wax melds with their bristles, freezing them just as they were left. This smorgasbord of color rests next to a rectangular worktable, creating a veritable buffet of choices for Van Tuinen's next masterpiece.

Van Tuinen knew at age five that she wanted to become an artist. Chasing her dream, she studied art at the Byam Shaw Arts Academy in London and later earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Washington. She has worked with internationally known artists in Japan, and glass artist Dale Chihuly asked Van Tuinen to teach him printmaking for a collaborative effort with the Seattle Opera.

Van Tuinen attributes her enhanced technical skills and depth of experience to her widespread background. "My art

is my life," she explains. "All that I experience and see becomes part of my work. How I respond physically, spiritually, and intellectually to my environment is the essence of my work." Her portfolio details her creative history, which encompasses media as diverse as paintings on canvas and clayboard, etchings, monotypes, Japanese woodblock prints, and tile.

Van Tuinen's landscapes translate nature's inspiring vistas into vibrant impressions of color and texture; in her most recent work, she seeks to embody light and its ever-changing nature. While her landscapes are reminiscent of the work of classic impressionists, Van Tuinen has built upon the rules established by traditional impressionism. She pushes the envelope of landscape art farther toward the abstract with her work, often causing the viewer to question where reality ends and fantasy begins.

Rather than using oil on canvas, Van Tuinen works with oil encaustic on wood. This technique suspends the pigments in beeswax and damar resin, which is added to the wax as a hardening agent and gives the paintings a rich, glasslike sheen when buffed. An ancient technique, encaustic can encapsulate and preserve the vibrant colors and flowing brushwork for centuries to come.

Van Tuinen adds pearlescence to some of her encaustics to enhance and hone their reflective quality. This pearlescence captures and further defines the peaks and valleys created by the encaustic layers. Then Van Tuinen often washes the entire piece in oil stick to give it one last layer of shine.

In *Rainforest Lakeside*, she used copper leaf to represent the coastline. "The colors change as you walk by the piece because layered brush strokes of hot wax create texture," she explains. "I want to pull you in by creating a piece that changes." While walking slowly past, the piece physically glitters and glistens as sunlight does over water—an effect Monet never achieved with mere oil paints. "I love these colors, but I never used to use them," she comments as she runs her hand gingerly across the surface. As Van Tuinen reaches out and touches the painting, I half expect her finger to cause concentric circles to fan out over the panel.

Van Tuinen more than uses colors; she's exploring possibilities with them. She has created many works that study the properties of light on water. Like *Rainforest Lakeside*, these pieces focus on a minute part of a greater body of water. She is also captivated by the subtle yet constant changes of the sky and the colors created by light reflecting >>



BREAKING THROUGH II



RAINFOREST LAKESIDE

**Encaustic** is a process that reaches back to ancient Greece. The word encaustic originates from the Greek *encaustikos*, meaning "to heat or burn in." With the encaustic process, pigment is encased in wax, forming a very durable medium that is impervious to moisture. Encaustic paintings dating to about 400 AD have been discovered which retain their original clarity.

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through the clouds, a theme explored in works such as *Breaking Through II*, which was inspired by a sunset after a storm.

Van Tuinen has been invited to participate in the International Arts Biennale in Florence, held December 3 to 11 in Florence, Italy ([www.florencebiennale.org](http://www.florencebiennale.org)). Every

two years the Fortezza da Basso hosts the Biennale, which was started in 1997 as a venue to host international career artists to exhibit their latest works in a panoramic survey of contemporary art. Artists are only admitted by decision of an international committee, and Van Tuinen is honored to be among the select few. She will be collaborating with poets Paul Nelson of Seattle and Janice King of Walla Walla, both of whom will write works that correspond to each of Van Tuinen's pieces; the poems will be displayed side by side with Van Tuinen's works. Van Tuinen will exhibit the show in her Olympia gallery before taking it to Florence (Opens Friday, October 21; call 360.705.1818 for details).

Closer to home, Van Tuinen's gallery participates with seven others in Olympia's Gallery Night, held from 5 to 8 PM every third Friday. She also regularly exhibits at Butters Gallery in Portland and has an exhibit at the Art Works gallery in Vancouver, British Columbia slated for 2006.

*Originally from Philadelphia, Alyssa Rosso now lives in Steilacoom, Washington. She used to relish her free-admission Sunday morning visits to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Now she traipses about meeting local artists to help (in her small way) to bring their work to the public.*

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## visiting the studio

The cold, industrial feel of Van Tuinen's studio is softened by the beautiful world she's created through her landscapes. Sunlight diffuses through large frosted glass panels she's hung in front of very wide display windows. These frosted panels play interesting tricks with the light. The otherwise harsh morning sunlight is tamed as it creeps through her intimate gallery. Van Tuinen's ever-growing collection of artwork hangs on either side of the panels, casting irregular shadows that stretch across the room. Most importantly, they provide the privacy that she safeguards and relishes. "I hate feeling like I'm in a fishbowl," Van Tuinen says. If it's a fishbowl, it is surely one of the most eye-catching variety.



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