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Capturing Moments

LISA ROGERS **writer**

a sip of coffee before the morning begins. A woman rubbing her pregnant belly. A prone figure indulging in a nap on a lush carpet.

Wellesley artist Lori Mehta captures these quiet, intensely private moments, approaching her subjects like a trusted confidante. There's a timeless, unhurried quality to her work that causes the eye to linger on aspects of each painting: the carpet's soft texture and design, which moves from realistic to an abstract geometry; the silken drapery of the expectant mother's gown; the bold stripes of the sun streaming through window blinds, catching the red coffee cup and the eye's brilliant iris. The intimate settings remind one of Vermeer's domestic still scenes, drenched with light and distinctly modern.



"I seek out that light—early morning, late afternoon light," says Mehta. "It's always been a hallmark of my work. You know that golden light at the end of the day? I love it."

Mehta brings that dazzle to not only these interior glimpses, but to landscapes, still lifes, and streetscapes, depicting them with bold colors, strong lines, and assured compositions.

Yet, for the longest time, Mehta says, she wasn't sure that she had a style. One instructor, the Boston-based Catherine Kehoe, told her: "Don't worry about creating a style. Just paint, and your style will come to you."



It turns out, Mehta says, that her style did emerge, and with it, an unusual technique. “I just started painting what I wanted to paint, and it took off.” Mehta works from photographs, most of which she takes herself. Some are posed, some not. Then she draws the image directly onto cradled board or canvas, or she might draw on paper, then use transfer paper to copy that image onto the surface.

She begins to apply oil colors, one at a time, approaching the image as a series of shapes. To free her to approach the subject in a looser way, she turns her work upside down. “It helps me simplify the image into shapes,” Mehta says. “I find that it clears my mind.”

The result is still representational, but with a modern, abstract quality that could be reflective of Mehta’s background as a printmaker and



graphic designer. Although she had a creative bent as a child, she did not begin painting until five or six years ago, when a neighbor invited her to enroll in a painting class at Newton North High School.

“I was scared to death,” Mehta says. “I walked in and I assumed everyone could paint better than I could. But the teacher was fantastic and helped me to relax, and I realized there was a real range of talent.”

Mehta entered a competition and won second place with a photograph of her young daughter at the beach. She took three sessions of classes with the same teacher and decided to learn more about the craft.

She found a mentor in Kehoe, who teaches at Massachusetts College of Art and Design and who has exhibited around the country, including at Wellesley College’s Jewett Arts Center.

“She’s tough, and you have to have a thick skin, but I had so much respect for her,” Mehta says. “The beauty of going into art when you are older is that you are less afraid. What’s the worst that can happen?”



That fearlessness has earned Mehta a string of honors over just a few years of entering competitions. Among many other awards, she was accepted into the Cape Cod Art Association in 2015 and won first place in a juried members' show; she was accepted into the prestigious Copley Society of Art in 2017, and won first place in the first juried members' show that she entered. A two-person show at the South End's Beacon Gallery in spring 2018 was another achievement. Besides her many awards, her Instagram posts caught the attention of Maine Cottage, a maker of coastal furniture, which offers nearly two dozen of her beachy scenes and other summery images.

“The accolades are fantastic because to some degree they validate that I can actually paint, and my work is resonating with a wide audi-



ence,” says Mehta. “But the actual painting process is so private and inward-looking for me.”

It's a process that requires a good deal of effort. “I work really hard,” Mehta says. “I put endless hours into my painting. I feel fantastic about what I have accomplished in this time. It's practically a dream come true. But I push myself. I live and breathe art. I see as much art as I can, I take my own photos to work from. It is on my mind all the time.”

Mehta paints at home in a room set aside for her studio, putting in long hours—from 9 a.m. to as late as 8 p.m.—taking breaks to walk her dogs, a Goldendoodle and Tibetan terrier. She spends about a week of those long days to complete each painting.

“I love getting into that zone” where time melts away and there is nothing but the painting. “You can't force it. Somehow, everything is

working, and you zone out. You're not thinking, but you're mixing paints and getting it on the canvas,” she says. “My worst paintings come when I try too hard.”

Mehta begins each painting with a red underpainting, a bit of which she will allow to show through to the finished work. Her works are not large, the biggest being 18 by 24 inches, yet her confident compositions fill that space with impact. Working with one color at a time, she loads a flat brush with paint in order to create a strong stroke. “I really like to make a mark and leave it,” she says.

The flat brush also allows her to use its edge to create a thin line. After applying the paint, she might delve into particular areas with a palette knife—one of the gifts of working with slow-drying oils. Mehta finds the unpredictable results add a layer of complexity that adds to the discovery of the final image.

Mehta makes an effort to challenge herself, seeking unusual perspectives that are difficult to pull off. “What I gravitate to is not what someone would usually paint,” she says. “It's a glimpse out of the corner of my eye, everyday moments.”

Taking time to savor those moments is the stuff of Mehta's work. “I 'see' paintings everywhere. Sometimes I make a note of where I see beautiful light and the time of day so I can revisit that spot,” she says. I keep a sketchbook with me at all times for this reason.”

“I say ‘work,’” Mehta explains, “but in reality, it sustains me.” **WW**