

The interconnectedness  
of nature inspires  
**Rick Stevens'** vibrant,  
multi-layered pastels.

# Cosmos of pattern

BY TAMERA LENZ MUENTE

WHEN I SPOKE WITH RICK STEVENS at the beginning of the year, he was marveling at the snow outside his window. A transplant to Santa Fe, N.M., last summer, he was experiencing the high desert winter for the first time. “The snow has turned the mountains white and is heavy on the trees,” he said, his voice bright with enthusiasm. “Low-lying clouds are moving through as the sun lights up the fresh snow. It’s really amazing.”

Stevens has spent more than 25 years making art, and his inspiration has been nature and the landscape throughout. After college in the early 1980s, he began experimenting with abstract landscapes, exploring unusual viewpoints such

as aerial perspectives, while also painting representational landscapes. While he has worked with both objective and non-objective subjects over his career, his recent work marks a return to abstraction—the culmination of years of exploration in both pastel and oil.

The artist grew up in Michigan and spent a year in his early 20s living alone in the northern Michigan woods while focusing on meditation and yoga. “I wanted to take some of the things I had learned and put them into practice,” he says, “and nature provided a very isolated existence. So that’s what I did for awhile: I dropped out of society. It was a profound experience.”



*A New Day Arrives* (24x32)

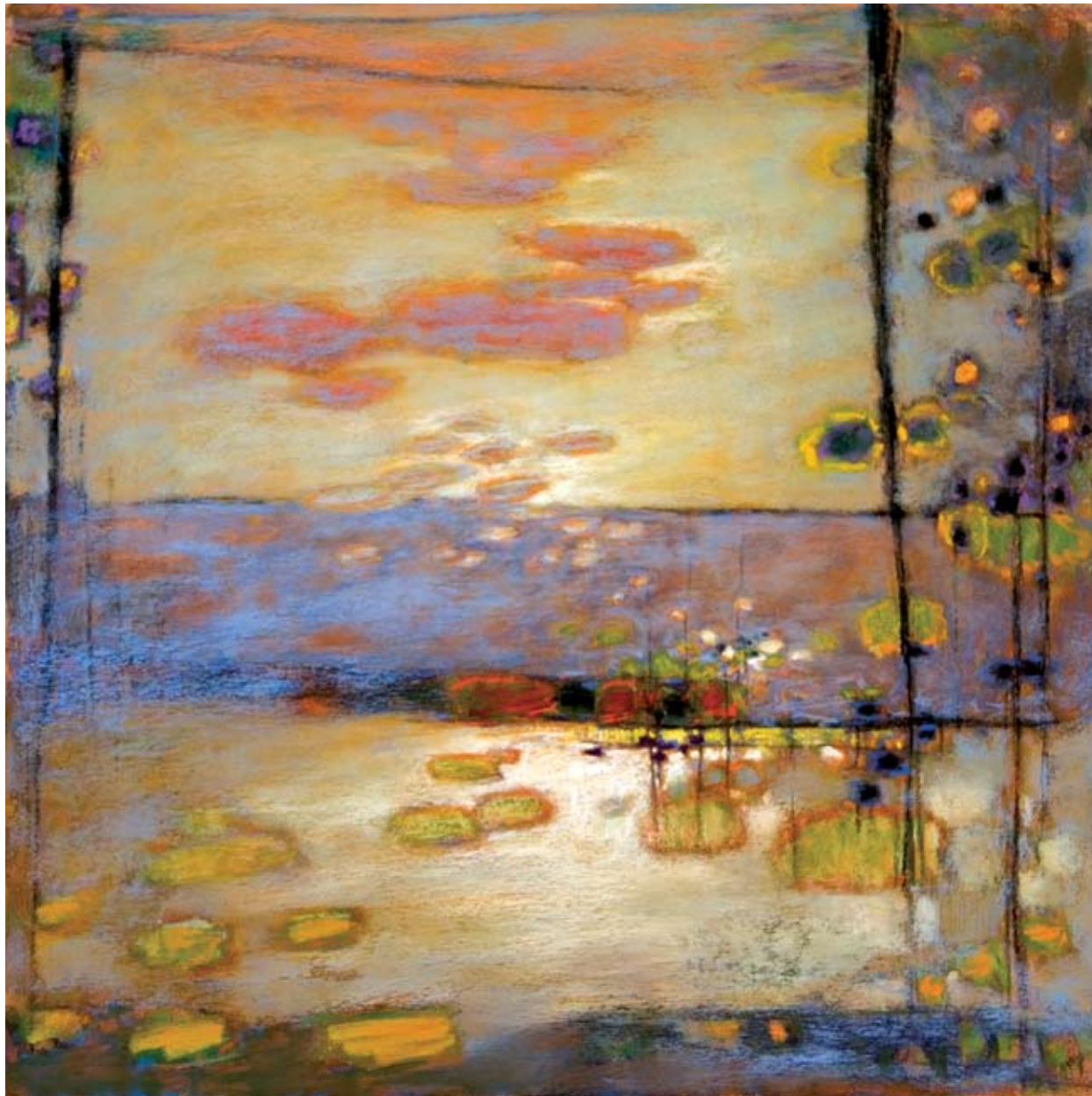
## North by Southwest

This early period of seclusion set the course for Stevens’ career. He chose to work as an artist full-time, occasionally doing remodeling work and sign painting to supplement his income. “I’ve made changes to devote my life to art, including my recent move to New Mexico,” he says. He hadn’t planned the move, either—it only came about after he was invited to stay in a friend’s guesthouse and wound up spending a month there painting and making pastels. The region agreed with the artist so much that he decided to relocate. “I’m now about 20 minutes outside of Santa Fe,” he says. “I live in a canyon and I can

see the mountains outside my window. I paint my pastels here and have a larger space in town where I can work in oils.”

Stevens’ earlier work draws upon the wooded Michigan landscape. “I painted the interiors of forests and studied how the light came through the trees, the overlapping space between the branches,” says Stevens. “I found that landscape interesting and challenging, and difficult to depict spatially.” While the memory of the northern Midwest landscape still affects his work, the Southwest has also made an impression.

“Since I moved here I’ve picked up on certain things in nature that I wasn’t focusing on before—



*From a Distant Horizon* (26x26)



Growing up in Sparta, Mich., **Rick Stevens** ([www.rickstevensart.com](http://www.rickstevensart.com)) first began painting with his father, a landscape painter. He went on to study at Grand Rapids Community College and Kendall College of Art and Design, and received his B.F.A. from Aquinas College, all in Grand Rapids, Mich. His work has been shown throughout the Great Lakes region as well as Santa Fe, including solo exhibitions at the Muskegon Museum of Art (Muskegon, Mich.), the Grand Rapids Art Museum and the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University. His work is currently represented by galleries in Chicago, Grand Rapids, Santa Fe and Englewood, N.J.

lichen on rocks, for instance. Where I live, lichen is everywhere. It's a little cosmos of pattern," says Stevens. He sees nature as one interconnected body, with patterns that echo one another on the micro and macro levels. "It's not a traditional landscape, where you have foreground, middle ground and background. By saying 'cosmos of pattern,' of course, I'm alluding to something grander. The pattern of the lichen could just as likely be that of the Milky Way."

Stevens' pastel, *Westerly Prayer* (below), is one of the first works he painted in Santa Fe. It suggests the forms of mountains and the sensation of heat and light. It also illustrates his interest in the shared patterns throughout nature. "Clouds become merged with the patterns of lichen on rocks. I like to work with ambiguity, one thing flowing into the next," he says. "I try to break up borders so there aren't separate parts, but everything flowing together."

#### Natural Patterns

These ideas of natural patterns find their roots in Eastern philosophy and 19th-century spiritual thought, both of which Stevens has studied over the years. He's especially fond of American landscape

painter George Inness (1825-1894), who incorporated similar ideas into his late work, which is filled with vibrant color and blurred forms that merge into a cohesive whole. "Inness studied the 19th-century philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg [1688-1772], and would often quote Swedenborg's principles about how each thing in nature had its own aura—a life and an intelligence," says Stevens. "I haven't studied Swedenborg directly, except for curiosity about Inness' life. But since then, I've learned that modern scientists have verified some of the things that people like Swedenborg and Eastern philosophers talked about



*On The Way* (18x40)



*Westerly Prayer* (24x40)



**Divine Convergence (24x30)**



**Filtered Light (26x26)**



**Leaving the Bonds of Earth (14x14)**

for centuries. Matter and energy are interchangeable, and conscious. That's influenced me to take that in and think about it when I'm out in nature."

Stevens looks to science for further inspiration. During a 1993 artist residency at Isle Royale National Park, one of five National Park Service residencies awarded to the artist, he read a book about modern physics. He later relayed some of the theories on quantum physics and their relationship to Eastern

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philosophy in a public lecture. A physicist, who happened to be in the audience, advised Stevens afterward to look up fractals. "Your work reminds me of fractals," the scientist said. Fractals are patterns in which the shape of the parts approximates the shape of the whole form. They exist in nature in forms such as ferns, clouds and snowflakes. "I don't have a technical or mathematical understanding of these things," says Stevens, "but they fire up my imagination."

He's quick to point out that his exploration of the spiritual connections within natural patterns isn't an intellectual process, but an intuitive one. "I'm not trying to decipher the interconnectedness of life every time I paint," he says, laughing. "It's mostly intuitive. The patterns keep appearing, but I'm not trying to force anything. I know my work is evolving, but at

this stage I'm not too concerned about getting something new. I'm just trying to home in on a direction. I'm always trying to get it right—to get that perfect balance and expression. When I find myself in new territory, it pulls me in and surprises me. That's what makes it exciting to work every day."

### Implied Space

The process of discovery is apparent in Stevens' work. His technique of layering pastels, scraping them out and reworking them until he's satisfied creates a visible push and pull of materials, a physical surface tension. "I've found a method that gives me a lot of plasticity," he says. "I mold things and constantly change them. It's not systematic. I don't lay everything down first and fill it in. I start working from any angle. I scrape down, I paint over. The work is always subject to drastic changes."

For him, a pastel doesn't feel finished until he has achieved a certain amount of buildup—as many as 15 layers. "I might get the composition right quickly," he continues, "but then I'm not satisfied with the thinness of the layers, or it just doesn't have the depth, the complexity. So, I just keep on it."

Stevens begins each pastel by toning white drawing paper with vine charcoal. An assistant helps him with the surface prep, working in the charcoal evenly with a chamois cloth, then applying powdered pigment to give an overall tone. Stevens welcomes her experiments with ground colors. Next, he marks on

the velvety surface with vine charcoal, sometimes building the composition on the spot, other times referencing thumbnail sketches. "The toned surface allows me to push things around," he says. "I can also lift off color with an eraser. I get down a beginning structure before I spray it with fixative and start building up. At this stage, it's still subject to many changes in composition, as well as color." His process isn't so different from transitions in nature—clouds grow and vaporize; rivers deposit silt yet also erode the shoreline; moss and lichens spread across rocks and fade in the sun. While the work is deliberate, it's also mysterious and magical.


As someone who works in both pastels and oils, Stevens has noticed how each medium influences the other. In his oil paintings, he uses both brushes and oil bars because they're more akin to working with pastels. He enjoys the textural qualities of oil paint, but he also simulates texture in his pastels by layering and varying their applications. "Scraping away with a knife creates a different texture," he says, "and sometimes I dip a brush in Bestine (a rubber cement thinner) and push the pastel around like paint. The Bestine dries very quickly and acts as a fixative."

He uses this textural aspect, along with color and value, to create implied space. While his work cannot be read like landscapes in the traditional sense, figure/ground relationships exist that evoke ambiguous space. Certain shapes appear closer than others, and some forms seem to recede into the distance, but he doesn't attempt to create a three-dimensional effect.

"I read that the early abstract painters found spirituality in flat spaces that allude to a fourth dimension," says Stevens. "Rather than paint a window through which you see the three-dimensional world, I allude to space, suggesting a fourth dimension, a spiritual dimension. I feel that I'm getting more of a sense of that with ambiguous space, with things that are implied rather than spelled out."

### Symbolic Associations

Stevens is aware that viewers hold varying expectations for art. Some seek recognizable forms in abstract work, while others are comfortable leaving things undefined. He likes to play with his own—and viewers'—symbolic associations. "As soon as I make a horizontal line, for instance, I see a horizon. A vertical line brings to mind a tree, or the edge of a building. Subconsciously we all make those associations. I'm playing with those all the time, partly within myself, but they're also a communication tool. Some associations are universal."

The artist's pastels can be read as non-objective, but they also bring to mind reflections of clouds and trees shimmering on water, or echoes of light fluttering through leaves in a forest. This kind of duality is the inherent pleasure of looking at Stevens' work. From one angle, it celebrates pure color and form, and from another, it becomes a meditation on nature, spirituality and the universe. 

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