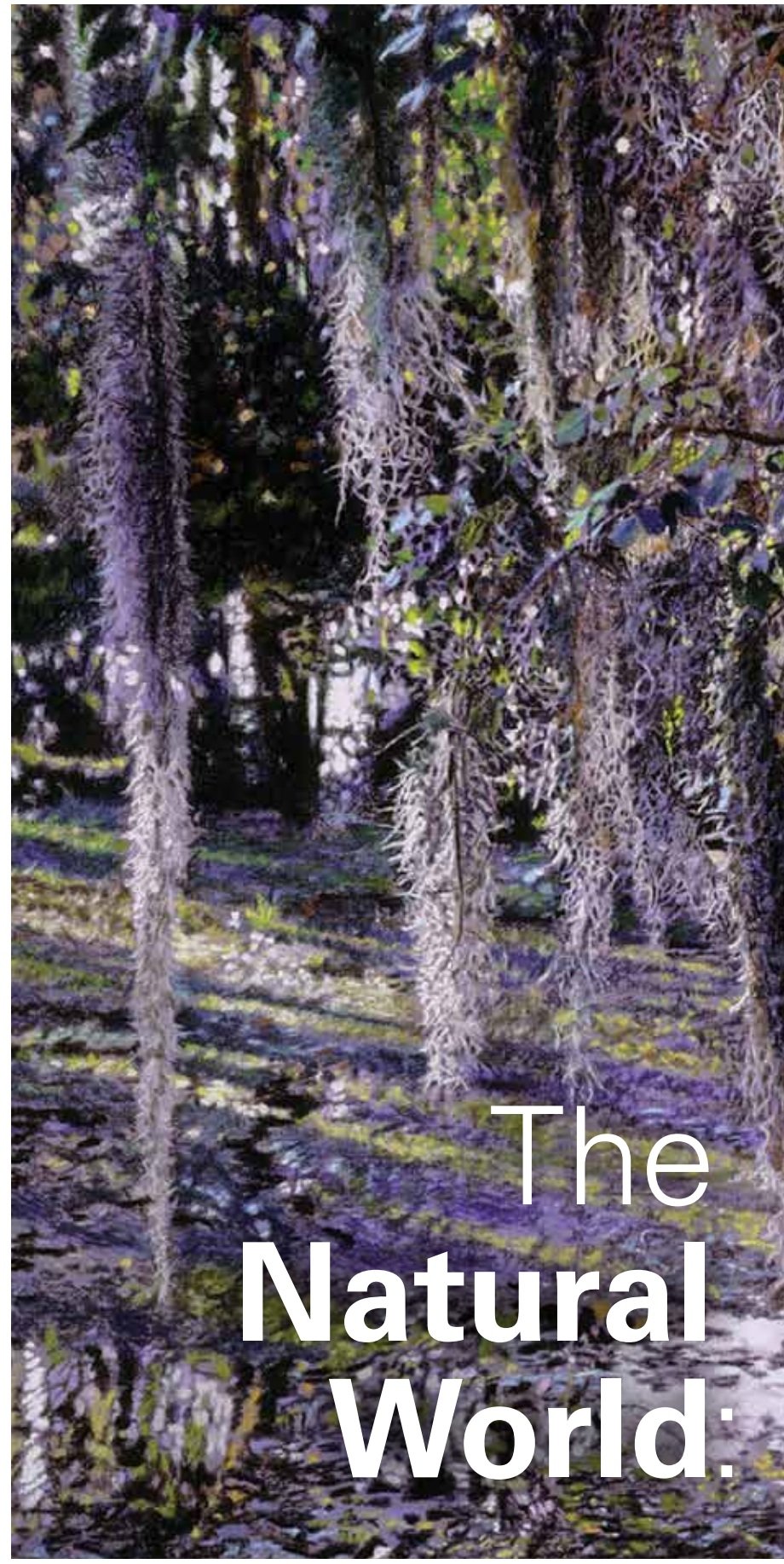
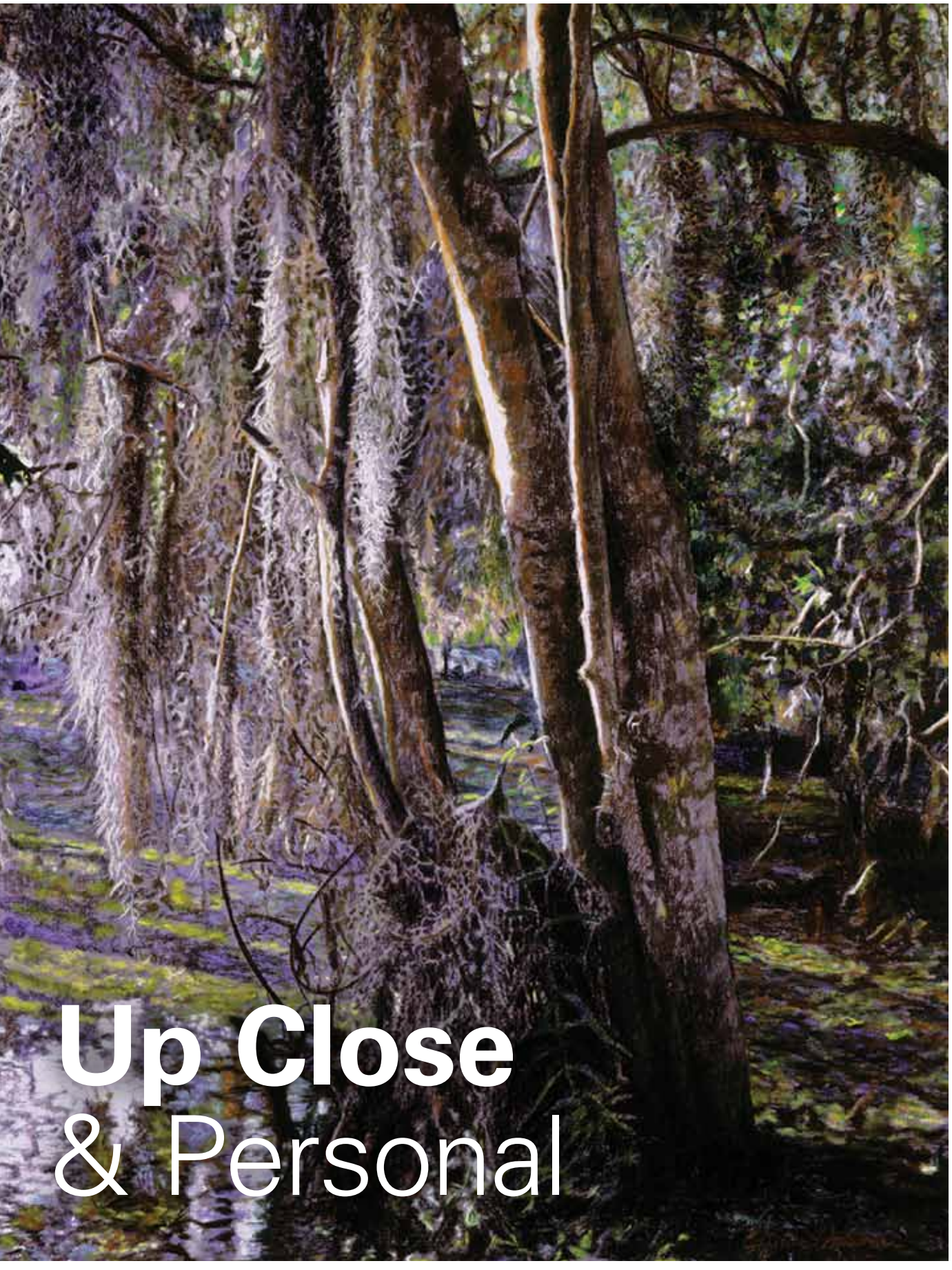
The Natural World:

In her expressive style of photorealism, Louisiana painter **Adrian Deckbar** creates stunning paintings that explore nature in close proximity.

BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN



Swamp Moss (29x39½)



Up Close & Personal

ALTHOUGH ADRIAN DECKBAR ENJOYED OCCASIONAL WALKS in nature while growing up as a fourth-generation New Orleanian, she always considered herself a city girl. From an early age, she loved painting and drawing and went on to study art, receiving a bachelor of arts and two masters. Later, she became an instructor at the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts, an adjunct professor and professor of practice at Tulane University, and a professional figure painter. She spent 35 years portraying people in commonplace city environments such as offices and cafés, where she posed her subjects looking out to blurry scenes, toward the end—nature. Her figure paintings, done in a photorealistic style, sold well in galleries across the country. She was living a picture-perfect artist's life, experiencing a level of success to which aspiring artists can only dream.

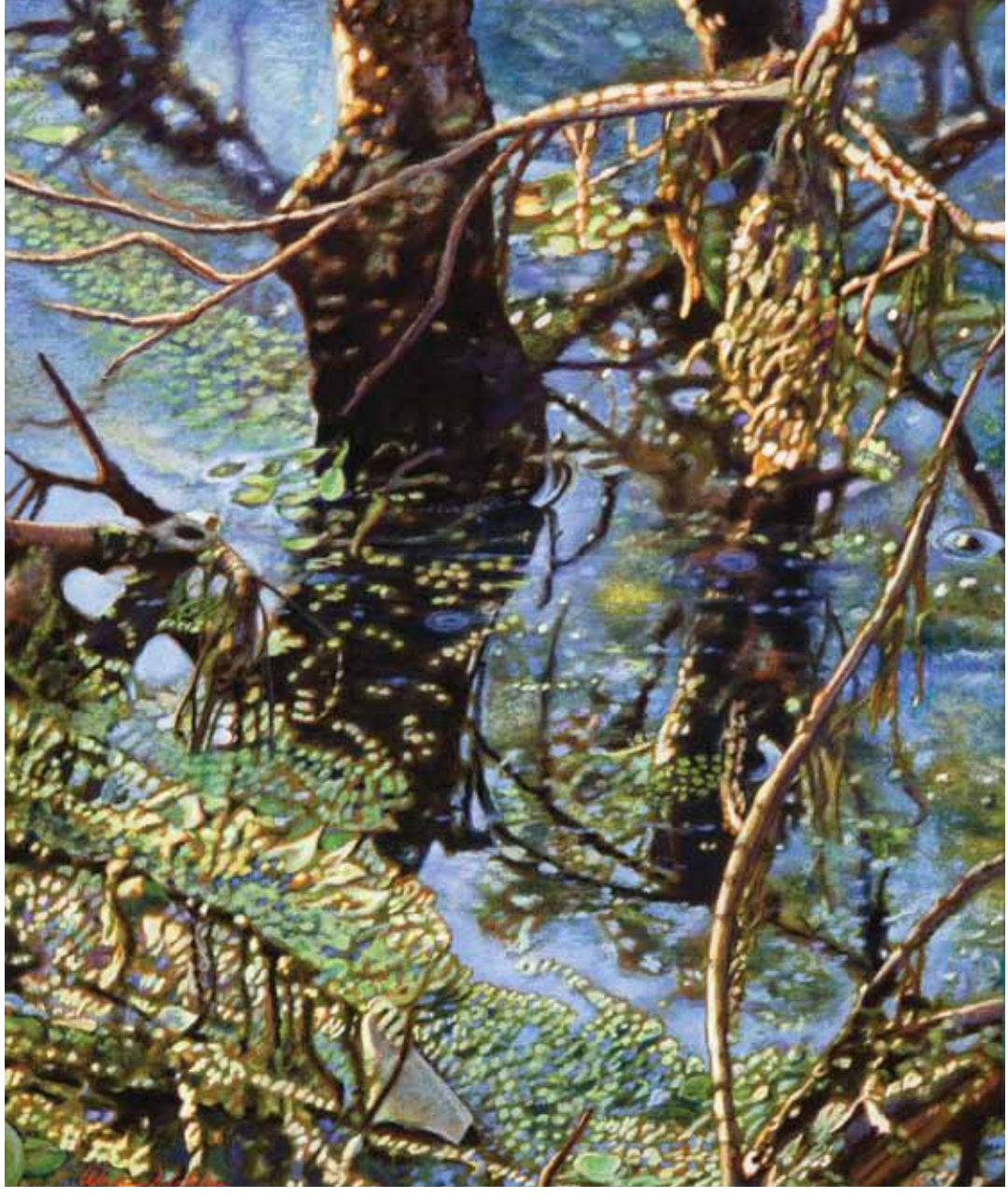
From Figure to Terra Firma

But about a decade ago, Deckbar had an epiphany that forever impacted her art and her life: She came to the realization that using the figure to embody all that she wanted to communicate was no longer viable. "I'd been painting women in their 20s and 30s, and when I was that age and even into my 40s, it served my purpose by being autobiographical," she says. "But by the time I was in my early 50s, I began to feel more like a voyeur. There was a disconnect, and the work was becoming formulaic. I had taken the figure as far as I could, and it didn't 'speak' to me anymore. I wasn't feeling passionate about my work."

Deckbar had always been drawn to nature; in the 1980s, she and Mike, her then-boyfriend (and now husband) purchased a boat to travel the New Orleans waterscapes, and she eventually brought her camera along to capture the scenery. She also cherished long walks among the rock ledges near their cabin situated on 60 acres in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas. Time spent in both locations—and the extreme contrast in them—made Deckbar feel "really alive."

Given this inexplicable pull toward nature, Deckbar decided to make a sea change in her art. "I wanted to go as far away from people, buildings, windows and the city as possible," she says. She decided to try her hand at painting nature and the landscape, sans figures.

Making a monumental change within a successful career required a faith and courage. With an extensive background in art history, she knew that mid-career changes are quite common and found encouragement via two artists. "One of New Orleans' leading artists, the late Robert Gordy [1933-1986], radically moved from what



Primal Dance
(34½x29)

At The Edge II
(opposite; 18x27)

he had been doing to making large, expressionist heads, for which he is now well known," says Deckbar. "So I took my cue from him and also from Edgar Degas [1834-1917]. Although known for his ballerinas, Degas shifted to painting landscapes. I also had unwavering support from Mike who told me to believe in myself—that I could do anything well that I set my mind and heart to doing. His vote of confidence meant a great deal."

She and Mike, a professional photographer, set out on photo shoots to the Louisiana swamps, bayous and rural lands. On one occasion, while visiting her sister in Natchitoches, La., she recalls, "At one of the former plantations there, I saw this beautiful old oak tree. My sister and I drove back and forth many, many times waiting for the sunlight on the trunk to be just right. Looking at the photos later, I realized that it really was as much about the light on the trunk as it was the colors on those roots."

One of these photos would become the reference for *Louisiana Oak* (page 00). With a selection of nature photos at hand, Deckbar got to work. "After a long day of teaching, I would go to my studio and paint until late in the evening," she says. "I was re-energized." She approached her new subject with abandon, not thinking about clients or galleries or of the reception—good, bad or indifferent—that these paintings might receive. Deckbar's only concern was painting, pure and simple—or not so simple. Compared to a figurative subject in which she could pose her subject in a carefully controlled environment for

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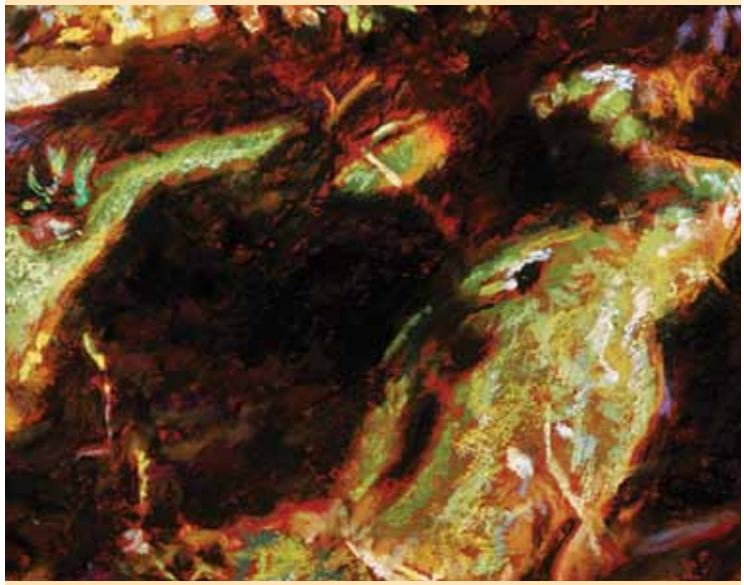

Louisiana Oak (detail; 39x31)

LIGHT YET BOLD

In *Louisiana Oak*, Adrian Deckbar pays tribute to inspirational muse Edgar Degas. "Degas put a big focus on board color and then let that color shine throughout the entire painting," she says. Believing that the ground needs to be "the spokesman for the painting," Deckbar chose a bold brick red and then added pumice to make the pastel gritty, an important factor for an artist who thinks color is about layering rather than blending. Still, she emphasizes that "less is more," and drawing lines of certainty is key to the palpable texture of the tree's roots and bark. "I was continually drawn to the roots in an abstract kind of way. The forms, shapes, the lights and darks are all directives when it comes to visual interest."

a photo session, landscapes seemed to present utter chaos.

Working diligently to become acquainted with her subject and to overcome compositional obstacles, Deckbar eventually created a consistent body of work. She didn't tell her gallery representatives of 17 years about her new subject for some time; when she did, she knew they were shocked. "Nevertheless, they decided to show them in 2003," she says. As a trailblazer, her new works weren't yet fully appreciated. She had a show with a different gallery in 2005, just two months after Hurricane Katrina, that was attended by a large crowd looking for a cultural outlet—and hope—post-hurricane. Not long after, Deckbar observed that many local artists were painting swamp- and marsh-inspired landscapes. "I had always cropped tight with my camera, but now I chose to zoom in for stronger landscape compositions and images that would not be cliché," she says.

Nature in Its Purist Form

Venturing still further afield, Deckbar and her husband discovered a remote wetland just an hour from the city. In what has become one of their favorite destinations, Wild Honey Island Swamp, they were able to explore the area using their pirogue, a small flat-bottomed boat popular with early Cajuns in the Louisiana marshes. "I was terrified at first, hearing alligators and other unfamiliar sounds," she says. But an overwhelming fascination with this primal world soon quelled her anxiety. In areas where the water was shallow, they would get out and walk among giant old-growth cypresses. This watery, forested world was pristine and primeval, and it had an enormous effect upon the artist's sensibilities. "I was seeing nature in its purest form," she says. The artist now has a cadre of extraordinary close-up images of the forest and wetlands from which to paint.

Louisiana Oak
(32x48)

Photorealism With a Twist

Not only is Deckbar forthright about her dependency on photography as an integral part of her artistic process, she's nothing short of exuberant about her results. "I'm a studio painter, not a plein air painter," she says. "I've tried not using photos, but that didn't work. They help me a great deal in composing my paintings." Over time, she's learned to be more adventurous with her references, editing objects in and out, often using a composite of more than one photograph.

Even her technique of applying pastel or paint has become freer and much looser, and yet, from a distance, her paintings look extremely real. "Sometimes a person will be walking by and ask my gallery director, 'Who did those large photographs?' He'll then take that person over to my work, and the viewer will be astonished to see all of the strokes," she says. "They're really quite painterly up close and photoreal from further away. I love that my paintings can be read in those different ways so the viewer can have different experiences. I'm not at all like a 19th-century realist painter. I love that quality of abstraction up close. It's like its own world."

Each of Deckbar's paintings is "born" out of a photography session in the wild. Because she's a professional photographer as well as a painter, Deckbar intuitively knows when she takes a picture whether it will become a pastel, an acrylic or an oil painting. Selected digital images are then sent to a photo processor to be made into slides. To begin the painting process, she projects the slide directly onto the paper or canvas, moving it around and back and forth to get the exact composition and effects she desires. She then draws

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Beyond the Water's Edge (39x31)

Cave Entrance (opposite; 19½x27½)

and paints directly over the projection. Later in the process, she'll leave the slide and work from multiple reference photos, sometimes composites, altering the painting to achieve her own creative vision. Deckbar learned the techniques of photorealism from Robert Bechtle, a professor at San Francisco State University and one of America's leading figures in the field of photorealist painting. Bechtle played an influential role in this movement that peaked in the late 1960s and 70s; it experienced a resurgence in the early 2000s in an updated, digitized version known as hyperrealism. "From Bechtle, I also learned how to achieve a glowing look in my paintings and about the huge importance of edges," Deckbar says.

Generally, Deckbar lightly draws the image with either a pastel pencil or a Nupastel and then proceeds with harder pastels before painting with softer ones. But she's not averse to gently stroking a harder pastel on top of a much softer one to achieve a glazing or scumbling effect, altering a color value or temperature.

"Over the last 15 years, I haven't blended with my fingers or a tool of any kind to smooth down or desaturate a color," she says. "Instead, I might overlay a pink or red over a green to desaturate it. So I feel, unlike in oils or acrylics, that I need a large palette of pastels to choose from. I might describe my method of painting as linear. It was once said that I 'draw my paintings.' I see myself as a draftsman first, then a painter. I've always had a great love of drawing, for direct mark-making. I feel that looking at a drawing is as personal as looking at someone's diary."

Though photorealistic at a distance, Deckbar's pastel paintings are created with a veritable

tapestry of woven strokes interspersed with the paper's color showing through. "Typically, I leave between 30 to 40 percent of the paper showing in the end," she says. Choosing her paper's ground color carefully, she'll often use large sheets of Art Spectrum sanded paper which she adheres to 4-ply museum quality rag matboard with Japanese rice glue (which is both archival and removable). In *Cave Entrance* (page 00), a scene from the Ozarks, she selected elephant gray Art Spectrum paper. The greenish yellow of the leaves against the gray paper causes the viewer to see a violet effect within the gray.

Deckbar sometimes uses Art Spectrum's Colourfix primer brushed onto 4-ply board first in one direction and then, after drying, in another to create a fine, canvas-like look to the surface. Occasionally during pastel painting, she sprays on a thin coat of Sennelier Latour Spray Fixative. To ensure that her mats stay clean, she uses a hair-dryer set on cool to blow away any loose particles before spraying the painting with a final thin coating of fixative. A reverse bevel mat adds extra security. For the contemporary look she favors, a thin, simple natural wood frame complements the artwork.

Although a good deal of her current paintings of nature are done in oil, acrylic or a combination of the two, Deckbar remains passionate about pastels and depicting and preserving nature in its primordial state. Her strikingly powerful paintings usher our attention to that delicate balance between the destructiveness of man and the endurance of nature, and to the importance of our conscious and deliberate efforts toward preservation of the natural world.

Vermont-based artist ROBERT K. CARSTEN (www.robertcarsten.com) is a master pastelist in the Pastel Society of America, pastel workshop instructor, exhibitions juror and arts writer.

Adrian Deckbar (www.adriandeckbar.com) holds a degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, a master's degree from San Francisco State University and an M.F.A from Tulane University. She's been an instructor at the New Orleans Academy of Art, an adjunct assistant professor and professor of practice at Tulane University, and artist/teacher for the M.F.A. program of Vermont College of Norwich University. Along with her extensive exhibition history, Deckbar has received prestigious grants and many awards. Her paintings are in private and public collections, including the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art and the University Art Museum in Lafayette, La. She's represented by Callan Contemporary in downtown New Orleans.