

Alexander Purves

Blue Mountain Gallery 2021 Artist's Statement

My watercolors are made from direct observation. The subjects are drawn from the natural world – modest stories found close at hand. The subjects are commonplace, but they are incomparably rich. Taking time to observe closely reveals endless patterns, textures, miniature worlds. Since childhood I have been fascinated by the small and the overlooked.

Ruskin, in his *Elements of Drawing*, prescribes the following exercise. To draw the overlapping branches of a tree, do not draw the branch. Rather draw the shapes of the negative spaces between them – and only those shapes. It is an excruciating exercise, as the slightest error will render the entire drawing useless. It may take forty minutes to execute an area three inches square, but doing this exercise alerted me to the beauty of these intricate patterns.

These paintings and drawings were made during the last two winters in my studio in northwestern Connecticut. They began as views from the window or as impressions remembered after a very cold walk. They also became less and less moored to the actual subject, though never independent of observation. I am most productive during the winter when trees are seen at their best. Their structure is clear and the overlapping limbs form a fascinating tracery. Colors are muted. Connecticut in the summer is unrelentingly and aggressively green. There are many shades of green, but one looks forward to autumn when leaves begin to drop away.

I enjoy the immediacy of watercolor and the fact that one must respond quickly to control the medium. To retain the luminosity of the paper, color is applied in transparent layers, building the image one brushstroke at a time. Any white in the painting is “reserved” - it is the paper itself. In many of the paintings portions of the sheet remain untouched, the image increasing in detail closer to the center – so that one can sense the painting coming to life. I do not use opaque white nor do I use a resist – or an eraser. I do not work from photographs. I make numerous study sketches – not as dry runs but as a means to observe the subject closely – to see what’s actually going on.

I have drawn these trees innumerable times – the cedars, the hemlocks, the maples – each time becoming more intrigued by their personalities. They are distinct as individuals but they also represent our fragile natural environment, an environment that we take for granted, but which we need to honor and protect.