



**Bets Cole: Rugged Land and Rocky Shores: Paintings from Oregon, Maine and Ireland
August 7 - September 7, 2024**

Opening Reception: Friday, August 9th, 5:30 – 7:30 pm, with Artist Talk at 6:00

First Friday Artwalk: September 6th, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present *Rugged Land and Rocky Shores*, showcasing long time local painter Bets Cole's new collection of works. This large series of small- to medium sized *plein air* paintings on panel or paper stands out for the breadth of its geographical scope. It explores how shape, structure, and color vary from one coast to another. Departing from our Western shores, the works journey through the valleys, mountains and high deserts of Oregon and California, detour through Texas, then proceed to Maine and Ireland. "I'm excited about this body of work because it covers a lot of territory," says Cole, "but the non-changing variable is me. I'm the one painting and interpreting."

Cole loves to travel, or rather, loves to travel and paint. Artmaking is her way of exploring landscapes and places intimately, of studying the specific complexities of rock formations, landforms, vegetation – their structure, textures, colors, and how the quality of the air and light affect them moment by moment. The sheer variety of landscapes remains an endless source of fascination. Her curiosity also extends to manmade structures and how they interact with the land.

A mentee of Nelson Sandgren, Cole started out as a watercolorist. She has retained a predilection for water-based media, including gouache and acrylics. The colors and atmospheric conditions of the site itself guide her choice of medium, transparent or opaque, for any given painting. The range of her palette, from cool to warm, is appropriately vast, ever responsive to the subject matter. Her colors may be bold (*Behind the Lobster Shack, Lavender Mountains, Smith Rock, Spectrum*) or more subdued (*Across the River, Irish Countryside, Refuge*), but always retain vigor.

Cole also employs charcoal, sometimes on its own, more often combined with paint, always in a distinctive way. With charcoal, Cole turns line into a fundamental component of painting. She deftly exploits its power to reveal structure and tell concisely, as well as its dynamic and expressive qualities. Her lines are by turns precise or suggestive, sharp or fluid, quick or meandering, heavy or delicate. "I can really express my excitement and my power through *line*," she says. This is also true of her brush strokes, which Cole uses confidently to convey texture, direction, rhythm, a sense of vitality and movement. She further plays with soft and sharp color edges to modulate her landscapes. Behind the mark making, we sense the gesture that created it, its immediacy and energy, and, somehow, the intimacy of it.

Cole tells the story of an ever-changing landscape. She is able to capture the essence of a fugitive moment or scene precisely because she remains open to making changes to her painting in response to the ongoing shifts in the living environment: for her, the act of painting is an interaction. “When you’re painting from life,” she says, “there are nuances, the light changes, a bird flies by, and you’re gathering all these different components. I love all the puzzle pieces. You’re in the space, you listen, things move, and you are studying and choosing to put something in, then you choose to take it out, but that layer remains, even if you covered it up.”

The interactive process underlying Cole’s painting is in fact a three-way interaction: “You have an idea, and the piece has an idea, and you have to realize what the piece is saying and go with it. You’re putting the medium down and working the surface again and again, and then it reveals itself.” This accounts for a seeming paradox of Cole’s work. Her pieces are striking for their sense of immediacy and aliveness, yet they also “evolve slowly.” “I continually rework my surfaces, layer upon layer,” she says, “which in turn allows the piece to gain depth, a sense of history and a voice of its own.”

Cole initially trained as a designer, and an unerring sense of structure and composition anchors each of her works. It is what she starts out with and builds upon. Yet something less tangible also seems to underpin all her pieces, and it’s her love of every step of the process of painting, including its more uncertain phases: “I always have my ugly, horrid periods in my paintings, and that’s when the miracles begin... But you have to have stamina!” she says, laughing. Perhaps you also need to be utterly comfortable in your medium, which she is: “I can express whatever I want to express.” Curiosity, ceaseless exploration and discovery, mastery, stamina, and the sheer joy of being out there painting, all of these contribute to imbuing her work with an unmistakable vitality.

Cole started out as a physics major before transferring to Cornell University and obtaining a B.S. Degree in Art, Design and Environmental Analysis. In New York City, she worked in advertisement and did children book design, while attending figure drawing sessions and going to museums. After driving across the country to Corvallis, Oregon, where she freelanced as a designer, she learned plein air painting with Nelson Sandgren, who became her mentor. After a detour in Portland, she settled in Eugene, attracted by its vibrant calligraphy community. She designed calligraphic tools and started a business, Calligraphic Lines. Next, she was hired to create the Design program at Lane County Community College, where she taught for a number of years. Along the way, she acquired an M.F.A. in Painting and Drawing at the University of Oregon, before becoming a full-time artist dedicated to painting on location.

Cole’s work has been exhibited nationwide and is included in numerous public and private collections, including at Oregon State University (Corvallis, OR) and the University of Oregon. It has also been featured in such publications as *Visual Magic: An Oregon Invitational* (Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, 2019), *Microbiomes: To See the Unseen* (The Corvallis Arts Center, 2017), and *David McCosh: Learning to Paint is Learning to See* by Roger Saydack (2017).

-Sylvie Pederson