



Featured Artist of the  
Month

**Shirley Bernstein OPS**

*By Carol Zack*

*When Shirley Bernstein, one of our newest Signature OPS members, moved from New York City to the rural northeast corner of Connecticut, she became captivated with the beauty of the land and sky and has been creating oil pastel paintings of all kinds of skies.*

*Shirley got her BFA at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA and shortly after was awarded her MFA from Indiana University in Bloomington, IN. She majored in printmaking and minored in painting and drawing.*

*Although her focus is primarily looking to the heavens for inspiration, she also enjoys drawing the figure and other natural forms. She has an extensive exhibition record that includes both her prints and paintings, and she considers oil pastel her primary medium.*

*While keeping up with a busy exhibition schedule, Shirley is also a dedicated art teacher and takes pride in her professional affiliations that add value to her teaching and studio work.*

*Please take a moment to learn more about Shirley Bernstein, our Artist of the Month for March 2007.*



*Lago Vista - 9" x 30"  
Oil pastel on Arches paper - 2006*

*Shirley, after reviewing your bio on the OPS website, can you give the members an update on what or where you are today? Where are you currently living and working? Are you painting full time?*

I work part time teaching at Quinebaug Valley Community College and spend as much time as possible in my studio. My studio is one half of the second floor of a colonial house we built. We live on the first floor and the second floor is divided into two studios. We eliminated any space above so the ceiling is to the rafters with skylights. I draw standing using the wall as my drawing board. The basement is set up for framing and matting and a printmaking studio with an etching press.

*Tell us how and when you discovered oil pastels, and what kind of oil pastel do you use?*

As a youth I was introduced to a 12 set of cra-pas oil pastels and did not like the harsh and limited colors. About 25 years ago I was given a set of Holbein oil pastels and started exploring them. They have been my medium of choice for the past 15 years. I also use some Sennelier, Panda and Van Gogh oil pastels.



*Chest Opener - 9" x 30"  
Oil pastel on Arches paper - 2006*

*I can see that you paint skies,....sunsets and sunrises. Tell us how you developed this theme and what drives your desire to create these paintings?*

Moving out to Connecticut from the city, the vastness and beauty of the land and sky captivated me. My images began dealing with the moving, majestic, aliveness of the sky and the land. They took on a spiritual quality with a meditative stillness as well as reflecting the force and vigorous action in nature. Luminous energy effects on the clouds and reflections on the landscape are explored through a combination of reflected, direct, filtered and backlighting situations. A beautiful landscape can be a dark one introducing the element of mystery, the notion of magic and the supernatural powers of natural forces.

### *How do you process the sky you decide to paint?*

These series of images explore the boundless space of the sky infused with light disappearing into the unique contours various horizons.

The horizon is used to divide the picture plane and suggest an impression of the flora and fauna of that site. The gestural color marks express the forms, movement, light and atmosphere. An environment that is easily accessible for the viewer to enter and perceive is created. It is there that the viewer's feeling and emotions are encouraged to emerge. Absorbed in understanding the inherent order in nature, I transform it into my personal view of its logical units.

The composing of these images deals with complicated figure-ground relationships where intervals of line, color and value become important factors in penetrating the surface of the picture plane. The marks both symbolic and representational draw the viewer into the essence of the forms transformed to give a sense of something greater and impending. There the viewer is invited in to explore the sensual and provocative forms hidden nature.



*Clouds in Flight -9" x 30"*  
*Oil pastel on Arches paper - 2006*

### *Is your work framed under glass?*

I spray them with oil pastel fixative and frame them under non-glare plexi. I recommend to my buyers that they change them to glass.

*Your bio also tells me that you are heavily involved in printmaking. How are you known to your collectors....as a painter or printmaker? Is the sky the only theme you use to create oil pastel paintings?*

I consider myself an artist who does "works on paper". I think of my oil pastels as color drawings. My primary medium is oil pastel and second printmaking and other drawing media. My main interest has been the sky and cloud forms; however I draw the figure and other natural forms as well.

***About how long does it take to complete an oil pastel painting?***

It varies, It takes at least two weeks and sometimes longer. But I have had images come really quickly. It depends.

***How did you come to determine the 9" x 30" format for all of your oil pastel paintings?***

I had been working on diptychs and triptychs putting together 22" x 30" images together to create a panorama. They got to be pretty big so I started cutting the sheets. They were as large as 30" x 66"

I wanted the landscape to really engulf the viewer and found the smaller sizes worked just as well and are easier to ship and frame. I started at 15" x 44" they went to 10" x 34" and now 9" x 30".



*Spirited Andes - 9" x 30"*  
*Oil pastel on Arches paper -2006*

***What do you teach at Quinebaug Valley Community College? Where is the college located?***

I teach drawing 2 and advanced drawing. The college is in the northeast corner of CT. I had been also teaching up to this semester at UCONN as a part time figure drawing instructor.

***You have lots of experience exhibiting and selling your work. What advice do you have for our members about selling and exhibiting oil pastel paintings?***

Take good slides and learn to mat and frame properly. Do not worry about being accepted or not. It has very little bearing on the quality of the work.

***Which artists have been most influential in the development of your style of work?***

My teachers influenced me Marvin Bileck, Jerry Kaplan, Sidney Goodman and William Bailey. Many artists of the past as Turner, O'Keefe, Degas, daVinci, Rembrandt, anyone who draws well.

***I see you have done some oil pastel workshops. Can you tell us what you think makes an effective or successful oil pastel workshop?***

I bring what I work with (*my materials that I know best*) and plenty of examples of other approaches to the medium. I do not do a "how-to", but show a variety of styles and techniques.



*Imposing Clouds - 9" x 30"  
Oil pastel on Arches paper - 2006*

***Of all the artists I have interviewed, you have a significant teaching resume. How do you think it impacts your work and your ability to produce?***

Of course teaching takes studio time away but it also gives you more flexible hours at better pay. It keeps you thinking about art and verbalizing your thoughts. Students look at things in a different way which can be enlightening and they keep you current and more open minded.

***You operate as an academic and a professional working artist. What advice comes to mind that you give your students about becoming a successful artist?***

Believe in yourself and what you are doing. Develop a critical eye. Experience life. Be open minded. Look at as much art as you can. Listen to criticism but weigh it.

*You belong to several professional organizations. What value have they brought to you professionally and personally?*

They give you a chance to share your ideas with others with similar goals. They provide exhibition opportunities and general support. They can give you technical support by sharing techniques. They can also be encouraging by inspiring the imagination. The organizations I belong to also have a teaching element where we outreach to others and share our knowledge.

Shirley thanks so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to help us learn more about you and the many successes you have had. We congratulate you on gaining signature status in The Oil Pastel Society, and look forward to many more wonderful oil pastel paintings that provide quiet inspiration and mystical grandeur.

Carol L. Zack  
Editor – OPS Artist of the Month



*Bands of Light*  
By Jodi Colella