

Artist Shirley Bernstein in her Hampton studio



Carla M. Catalano

# Magical, mysterious skyscapes

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Saying that Shirley Bernstein draws sunsets is like saying that Monet painted flowers.



It's true that the Hampton artist's subject matter, on display at the University of Connecticut's UConn's Homer Babidge library through Aug. 15, is the sky. And it's true that she uses the vivid, sometimes hyper-real colors with which nature sometimes pains the skies.

But her work has a kind of monumentality and power that removes it from the stereotype of landscape, or even skyscape.

Her oil pastel drawings evoke the implacable forces of nature, the ominous approach of storms or the tentative return of sunlight, and change the way viewers look at the sky when they step back outside.

"I always had worked with organic forms," Bernstein explained. "That had been a main theme of my work over the years. But with the change from the city environment to Connecticut, I became aware of the sky and the beautiful forms in the clouds."

Eight years ago, Bernstein moved from New York City to the northeast corner of Connecticut, an area which she said in a statement about her work captivated her "by the vastness and beauty of the land and sky."

But her real epiphany came on a foliage trip to Massachusetts, when she climbed a mountain.

"The light was changing and it was becoming dusk," she recalled. "I saw how the light reflected on the land." That vi-

sion of sky and land was the impetus of her current series, her first in oil pastel.

"Night Spirits: Skyscapes" presents Bernstein's drawings, some of which are in diptych or triptych form. Some are ominous, some serene, some vaguely unsettled. All of them possess the drama of change, of being on the verge of transformation.

"Nam Remembered" depicts

feathery clouds in a Kodachrome mix of deep velvet blues, reds, purples and yellows; "Lost Desire" frames gray, black and white open space with intense, fiery edges.

Beginning with dark-toned paper, Bernstein constructs layers of marks with sticks of oil pastel, a medium which resembles crayon but is softer.

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# Magical landscapes

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and more blendable. The dark work surface enhances the contrast between lights and darks and allows her to play with placing the warm colors, which are supposed to come forward, in the back instead, as Degas did in his pastel drawings.

"That's a real challenge and I like challenges," she said.

"I work on the wall so I can get back from the work and use my whole arm and body," she explained. "I do a lot of walking when I'm working. And I

work all over the picture. Whatever I do in one area affects another."

Bernstein said she takes photos and does sketches to serve as reference points before she begins a new piece. "If I just take it from my mind, I would repeat myself," she said. "Mother Nature is much more creative than I am."

Bernstein's heart has always been in drawing, she said, even though it wasn't an option for a major when she attended the University of the Arts as an undergraduate.

She received a B.F.A. with honors from that institution and then went on to Indiana University where she received her MFA, with honors in 1965. In the summer of 1964, she was on a painting scholarship at the University of Rhode Island.

"My undergraduate and graduate work was all in printmaking, which is very related to drawing," she said. She has worked in lithography and wood engraving — both line-oriented printmaking processes — but finds that direct drawing "can move a lot faster. You can explore and make changes easier and grow more with drawing."

Her chosen medium is, however, rather unforgiving.

The drawings, she said, "may look spontaneous and fresh, but they do take a while to do. You can't really cover up a lot, because it gets muddy. You really have to make your decisions."

Bernstein said she has been influenced by the work of Degas, whose draftsmanship she admires, and by the paintings of Turner, whose work also focused on the forms of clouds in the sky.

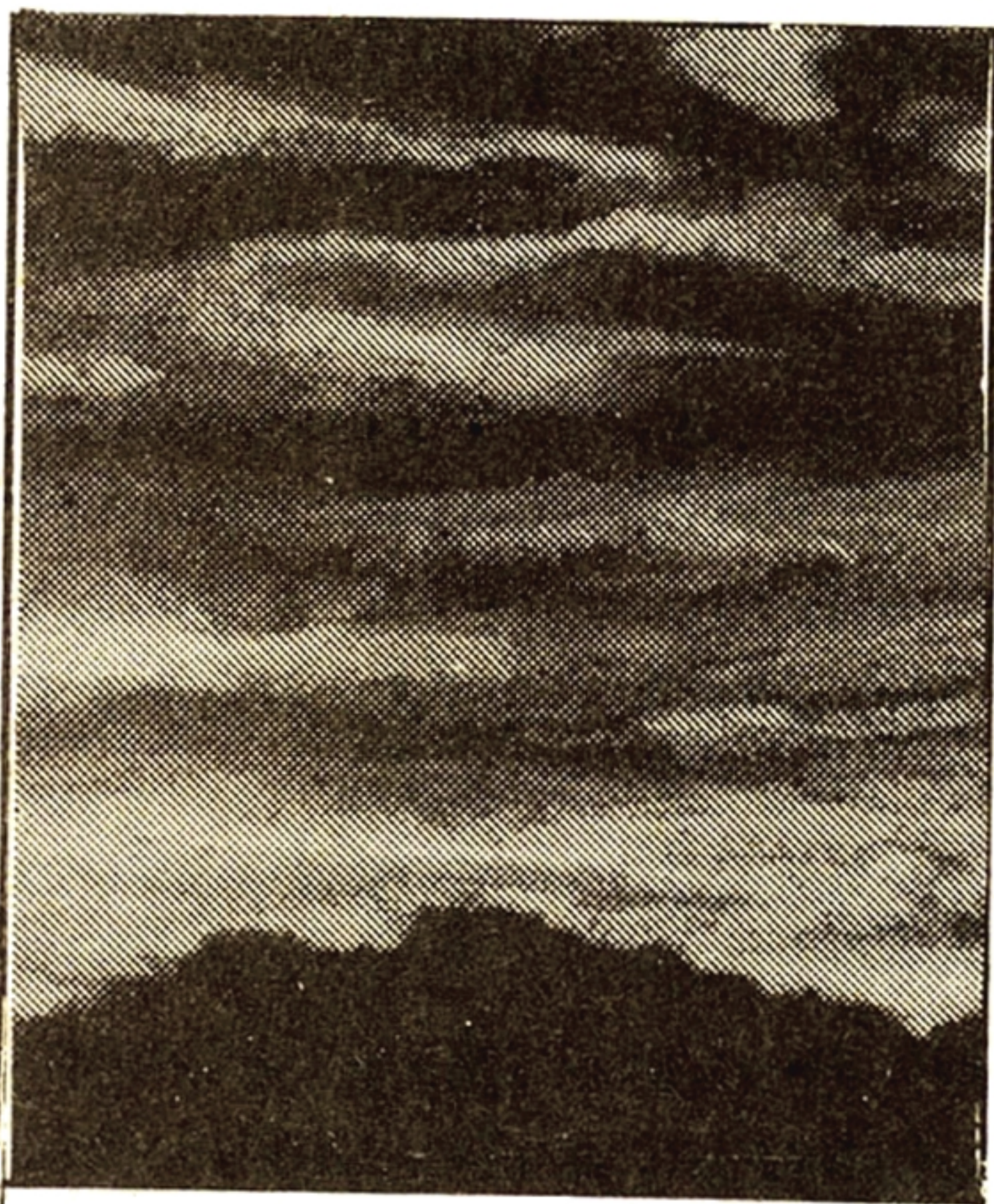
She herself has been an influence on new artists, with over 30 years of teaching experience under her belt. Currently, she teaches two-dimensional design, computer graphics, art history and framing at Quinebaug Valley Community Technical College in Danielson. Prior to that, she taught at Three Rivers in Norwich and at Eastern Connecticut State University.

She has been represented in countless group and one-person shows, throughout the East Coast, and is the frequent recipient of honors and grants for her artistry.

Bernstein said that people who see her work often tell her "I saw a sky that you'd love." That's a gratifying by-product of her work, she said. "They become more aware. That's something I want people to do."



**WEEKEND**



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