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WATERCOLORIST ALEX TOLSTOY

Randomness

SEAWATER TO FRESHWATER

BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY



You really can't control the water. You can only suggest things for the water to do. It's kind of like raising kids. There is a balance between control and allowing them to run free."

-Alex Tolstoy

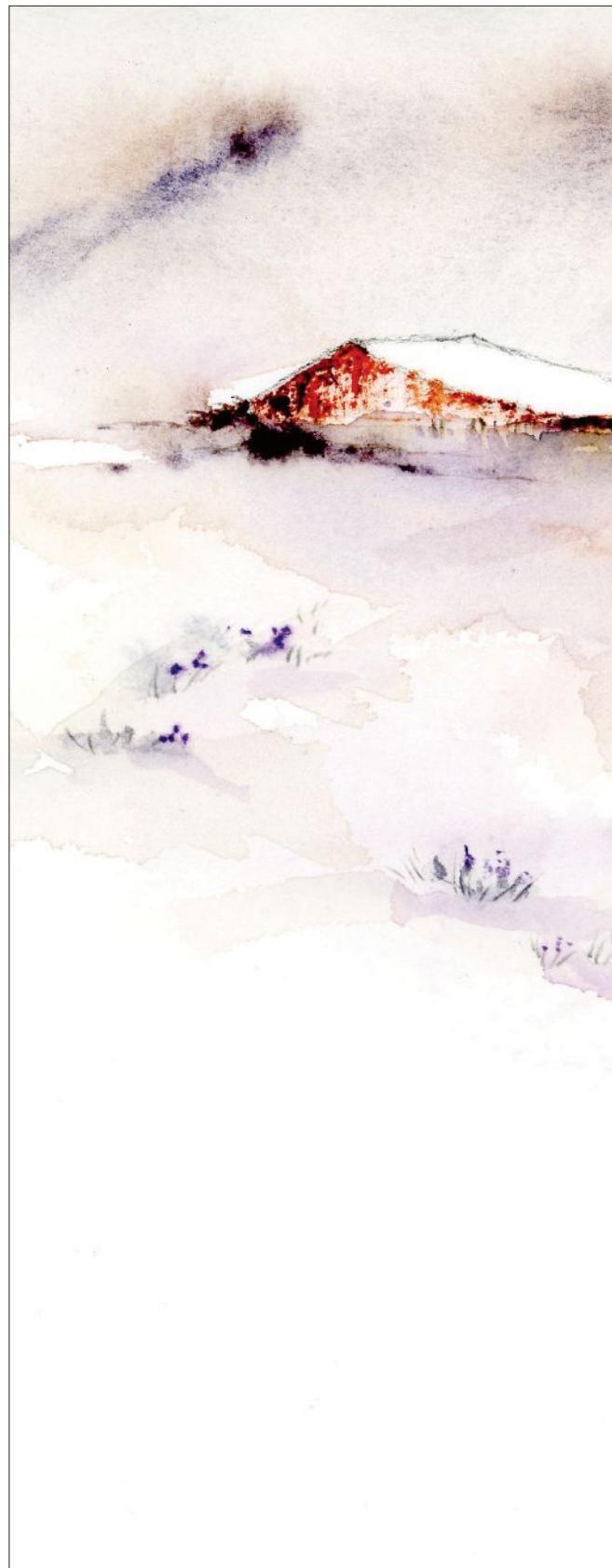
Before making art with water, McLean painter Alex Tolstoy was making sounds in water. As a government oceanographer specializing in acoustics, she had a career at the Naval Research Laboratory. At the same time, she began exploring watercolor as an art medium. Eventually she turned to painting watercolors full-time. You could say her first career whet her appetite for using water as both a medium of expression and a subject of her art.

But before her interest in oceanography and painting with watercolors, Alex received a Masters and Doctorate in mathematics from George Washington University and the University of Maryland, respectively. Growing up in the District, her first experience with making art was using oils. Later on, her passion for art was rekindled with watercolor classes at the McLean Project for the Arts. "Things just clicked," she said, and when the opportunity arose to make a career change to art full-time, she took it.

Oceanography and watercolor: clearly, Alex has an affinity for the wet stuff. Though she lived briefly in Hawaii with her photographer husband, Ron Colbroth, her interest is less in recreation than in exploring water's properties. In oceanography, she measured sound waves passing through salt water. In painting, she looks to control water's flow; appreciates how it accepts pigment as it mixes and swirls on the paper while it dries.

"You really can't control the water," Alex says. "You can only suggest things for the water to do. It's kind of like raising kids. There is a balance between control and allowing them to run free." Over time, she's learned to channel water's flow on paper but, really, it's water's randomness, its freedom to flow in unexpected ways that Alex loves about the medium.

It seems a bit counter-intuitive for this mathematician-turned-artist to relish randomness over the certainty and precision found in formulas and calculations. Alex told me that I shouldn't think of math and art as



opposites; they're complementary. She reminded me of the "butterfly effect," where a small event can have a major impact, like the metaphorical example of how the flapping of a butterfly's wings might influence the formation of a hurricane. The same holds true for art and science.



"Farmhouse in Winter," watercolor,
7" x 11"

I ask Alex one of my favorite questions: "What does your artwork say about you?" She pauses for a moment, looks down and responds: "Hmmm... I'm not that introspective. I guess it means I'm not dead yet!" Laughing, she continues. "When you reach a certain age, you have to ask yourself, are you going to continue

doing what you have been doing over the decades or are you going to try something different, something new, something creative?"

Watercolor painting is Alex's path to creativity, and her art continues to evolve and grow. When she first started painting about a decade ago, she faithfully



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depicted objects and places. But then she began to take details away, leaving just the key brush strokes. Eventually, when enough detail disappeared, what remained was an abstract representation which allowed her audience to add their own experience and imagination to her work.

That's her point. She doesn't want to impose her perspective. While some watercolor artists use a dry brush to create a sense of realism, Alex uses an abundance of water to create her impressionist interpretations. "What I intend is less important than what the audience brings to the piece," she says. "I want the viewer to wander around my pictures with their own musings."

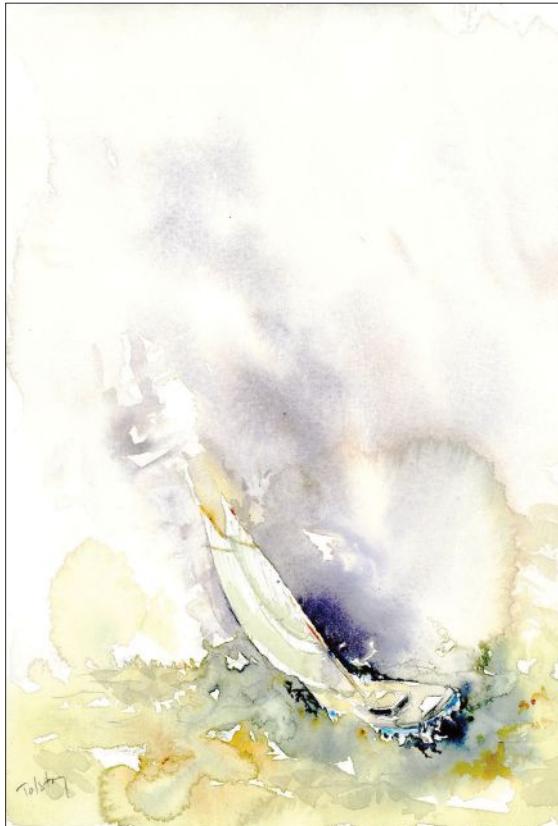
As we walk downstairs to her basement studio, her framed watercolors line the walls. Alex has a distinctive style: sophisticated, spare, always fluid. I examine her work and find I am drawn to pieces that demonstrate the power of water as the medium and subject. "Fearless" in particular catches my attention. It shows the raw force of the ship's bow breaking through waves; "Hooked" expresses the strength of a fish fighting against a line; and "Farmhouse in Winter" captures a quiet, solitary energy of a snowy afternoon.

Now downstairs in her windowless studio, it's dark, which gives the space a monastic feel. Books, artwork, and magazine clippings surround her cramped work



Above: "The Glow," 12" x 8"; and
"Fearless," 8" x 10"

Opposite, top: "Blue Farm," 8" x 10"; and
"Hooked," 7" x 5"
All are watercolors.



area; a single high-intensity light hovers over her current project; an array of brushes and an almost limitless supply of paints are nearby. I can tell she is a focused artist. It's the scientist in her, and she agrees. When she's creating art, she doesn't listen to music; Alex is in the moment thinking only about the piece she's working on.

"I'm not a disciplined artist," she says, and that surprises me. "I have to be in the right frame of mind." Alex has dry spells that might last for a few weeks. Then a picture from a magazine, thoughts of a recent trip, or a distant memory will trigger images that begin to germinate. When the pressure builds, she feels a need to express the thoughts roiling within her. She begins with a small pencil sketch and then the watercolors come out. Alex works quickly; the piece usually is completed in one sitting. She rarely returns to make alterations.

Alex's transition from seawater oceanographer to freshwater painter seems complete, but I have one more question: is she related to the great Russian author, Leo Tolstoy? "Yes," she says with a small smile, "there is a distant connection but not so close that I'm receiving royalties."

Alex Tolstoy | atolstoyart.com