



A Painter's Painter | Mary Nagel Klein

What can we discover about an artist by looking at her work? A survey of painter Mary Nagel Klein's latest pieces provides a window into this introspective artist's life and inspiration.

Unspoiled scenes from the natural world, unassuming vignettes found in the home, and intriguing new takes on the floral genre – all speak to a sense of shared vision between the viewer and the artist. Klein's

ability to find what is remarkable - in what we often overlook during our busy lives – allows us to make connections and gain deeper understanding. By using a limited but vibrant palette, Klein takes us along with her as she rediscovers her subjects and imbues them with newfound respect.

Klein first knew she wanted to be an artist when she was 5 years old. It was the early 1960's when she found herself sitting for her portrait in the studio of a professional

artist. Although she was a fidgety sitter at such a young age, she was also a sponge for all that was happening around her. It was a profound and life changing experience – especially given that the artist shared her gender. Knowing that a woman could rise to this level of artistic accomplishment planted a seed.

Fortunately, this seed landed on fertile ground. Klein had a childhood that allowed for a tremendous amount of freedom of expression and creative discovery. Making and inventing was encouraged and supported – whereas coloring within the lines was frowned upon. Klein recalls, “I don’t remember there ever being a coloring book in our house.” Instead, her family’s home contained an abundance of art materials, walls hung with reproductions of Van Goghs and Picassos, and original art purchased at art fairs and on trips.



1 - Girl Roller Skating - 1962 (age 4)

Klein’s early years were shared with a family that very much supported the arts. Her parents both came from very strict Calvinist families. When they made the decision to raise their three daughters in the

very liberal town of Madison, Wisconsin – they also made the decision to embrace new freedoms. There was a Bohemian feel to their home life – music, visual arts and dance filled the air.



2 - Abide Within; casein on panel; 16" x 20"

In the midst of this supportive environment, Klein showed a strong aptitude for drawing and painting. At the age of 8, she attracted the attention of her teachers when she drew a highly realistic depiction of two clasped hands of different races. Later, in high school, she took a class in acrylic painting where she learned to stretch canvases and how to mix and handle paint. Her choice and execution of a large rendering of a reclining nude garnered recognition at the time. It also hinted at her future explorations in classical realism.

Before pouring her time and creative energy into raising three sons, Klein was exposed to life drawing for the first time. At the age of 20, at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, she was introduced to the time-honored tradition of drawing from the nude model. In charcoal and on newsprint she relished the excitement and immediacy

of drawing directly from life – while receiving valuable critiques.

With her children well on their way to adulthood, it was time in the late 1990's for Klein to renew her love of painting and her early commitment to be an artist.

Community college watercolor classes led to art center drawing and oil painting courses. Finally, in 2003, she entered the Minnesota River School of Fine Art in Burnsville, Minnesota. With atelier-trained instructors, she further honed the skills that she relies on to this day.

York City (2008), to earn an Artist's Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board (2009) and to be the Artist in Residence at The Robert Henri Museum (2019).

Several medium changes also occurred during these 2 decades. Klein worked in watercolor for a little over a year before switching to oils. Her oil painting technique evolved from palette knife to impressionistic brush work over the course of a decade. Her



3 - Wistfully; casein on panel; 14" x 24"

It was also at about this time that Klein began to seriously exhibit her work. In 2001 one of her watercolors was chosen for the cover of Art Calendar Magazine. In the same year she earned a \$1000 award from International Artists' Magazine for another watercolor. She would go on to be juried by Irving Sandler into a group exhibit in New

latest medium adventure has been with casein. She has been working exclusively in this most ancient painting medium since July 2017. Having written the book, Casein Fine Art Painting, and winning numerous awards and honors with her casein paintings, it looks like she has found her forever medium. Although there are challenges to painting in casein, there are many positives.

She cites its beautiful matte finish, luscious color, unrivaled archivalness, and even its unique smell. While some artists have an aversion to its odor, the smell of casein brings Klein back to her days in nursery school with its similarly smelling poster paint. It is said that olfactory memories are some of the strongest. Remembering fondly her earliest times at the easel may be one of the major influences in her devotion to casein today.



4 - Tenderness; casein on panel; 10" x 10"

Klein's collectors also enjoy her dedication to this new medium. "I just hung 'Sumac Along the Path' in our favorite room where we eat dinner and watch the news . . . it is a constant source of joy for us, and your beautiful casein rendition of the path we so often travel makes us smile every time we see it. Know that we will treasure and honor it and it will be a valued part of our home – THANK YOU!" comes from a long time collector. From others, "The excellence of your work comes through in every brushstroke," "It's amazing what you do with casein!", "Great work. I love that I know who painted it as soon as I see it!" and finally, from a renowned juror, "Mary Nagel

Klein is a painter's painter and breathes new life into the still life form."

Klein is a member of the National Association of Casein & Acrylic Painters and has exhibited with them in New York City at The Salmagundi Club for the past two years. For those curious about casein, it is the oldest paint known to man – dating back 49,000 years to the Sibudu Cave in South Africa. Its binder is casein - the protein in milk. For comparison, watercolor's binder is Gum Arabic and, like casein, is also a water media. Casein could have easily been called watercolor – and what we know of as watercolor could have been named Gum Arabic. It just so happens that casein is named for its binder while watercolor is named for its solvent. Casein handles similarly to gouache - drying very quickly to a matte finish. Unlike gouache, you can frame casein paintings like oils - with no glazing. The surface of casein paintings can be buffed (after letting them cure for several weeks.) Buffing creates a lovely satin patina which acts to protect the surface. Over time, casein paintings become impermeable to water - while their colors remain vivid and vibrant for centuries.



5 - Vista; casein on panel; 16" x 20"