



LEFT

Day's End

2008, watercolor,
20 x 18. Collection
the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

White Ladle

2007, watercolor,
20½ x 19. Collection
the artist.

Image First

Often working in a series, **Nancy Gaucher-Thomas** selects still life objects for what they can contribute to a composition.

—
by Gerry Desautels

Nancy Gaucher-Thomas considers the imagery she develops more important than working in a prescribed way. She begins any new painting by first assessing the values correctly, then creating a strong composition and communicating what she finds most appealing. "Watercolor requires a great deal of planning," she says, "but because I work on 500-series plate-finish Bristol board, I have the flexibility and ability to rework the surface without too much difficulty. The medium is secondary to the imagery.

"As I begin a painting, I really don't think too much about the 'thing' that I'm painting as much as I think about the

shape or silhouette of the objects and how they relate to one another within the two-dimensional surface," she continues. "I feel strongly about the versatility and flexibility of the medium and go to great lengths to push it in directions that may not be considered characteristic of traditional watercolor."

Although to an untrained eye her subject matter can border on the mundane, Gaucher-Thomas' work evokes a stillness, and even a Wyeth-like melancholy, found in the most unlikely objects. "A few years ago, as I was preparing for an exhibit at the Providence Art Club, I looked around my studio and didn't really find anything that appealed to me in the way of subject matter. But then I noticed a ladle and realized, 'If I can't paint that one object and have it really mean or say something to the viewer, what's the point?' I can understand how artists become more abstract in their thinking and in



BELOW

Morning Blend

2008, watercolor, 24½ x 22.
Collection Mr. Richard Koziara.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Silver Votive

2007, watercolor, 21½ x 21½.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. J. Patterson.



description of objects, but for me, the goal is to say as much as I can about an object or subject with fewer words, or brushstrokes—just a very simple, clean statement that may mean something different to each person.” The long-handled white kitchen ladle, for instance, is studied against a lightly shadowed and weather-worn wall. Trying to convey my subject, I realize what I feel is empathy—a feeling of connection. A variety of factors come into play, including atmosphere, contrast, texture, and the relationship of shapes, which are all important when translating my vision onto paper. Much of my work is done in series, which allows me to explore my subject on a more personal level.” For a still life, Gaucher-Thomas first selects the objects. It has taken me years to acquire an eclectic array of painting

subjects through many forays to antique shops and garage and estate sales. Something just catches my eye, such as the patina or shape.”

In her controlled studio environment, Gaucher-Thomas enjoys simple but modern artistic pleasures—a model platform, a light table, music, running water, and a digital camera. “Although I have control over artificial light sources in my studio, I’m not really that concerned about the light as much as how the story of the shapes I combine will translate,” she says. “I do take photos for documentation so I’m not held hostage to the still objects staring back at me on the table. Ultimately, the design and composition of the piece is what’s most important for me to capture.

“I work with a lot of glazing—adding and removing layers





LEFT
Interlude,
White Ladle
Series V
 2007, watercolor,
 20 x 18. Private
 collection.

of paint," she continues. "My paintings begin with a warm underpainting of raw umber with a hint of body color." She then lays a variegated wash using plenty of water. In the next phase she floats a succession of washes over one another, allowing the colors to mix and mingle on the surface. At this point she removes the paint with a natural sponge and puts a subsequent layer down while continuing to lay thin washes until she has achieved the desired surface paint quality and texture. Throughout the process the artist simultaneously assesses the overall design, values, and contrasts. "Most times what remains is more beautiful than if I were to put down layer after layer of transparent or opaque color," she describes. "In the end, I'm rewarded with a surface residue of several different colors with more integrity and character."

In another piece, Gaucher-Thomas couples her prized ladle with a photo of a dancer. "Other than being attracted to the shapes and how they relate to one another, the viewer may see or feel something that he or she can relate to," she says. "In *Interlude, White Ladle Series V*, I included the photo because I studied dance for many years and have always been drawn to the figure. The image, I felt, added to the overall composition of the painting. For the most part, the reason I choose objects is because they work in a composition, and not for their sentimental value."

When she paints in a series, Gaucher-Thomas is deliberate and looks for the possibilities before starting. "If I'm attracted by an object, such as this brass-topped, glass coffee decanter I found, I have to visualize the potential 'life in

"For the most part, the reason I choose objects is because they work in a composition, and not for their sentimental value."



ABOVE

Hammersmith Heifers

2005, watercolor, 9 x 15.
Collection the artist.

LEFT

Silver Bowl

2005, watercolor, 11 x 15.
Collection the artist.





OPPOSITE PAGE

Contemplation

2006, watercolor, 11 x 10½.
Private collection.

RIGHT

Pink Roses in Ornamental Vase

2005, watercolor, 15 x 11.
Collection the artist.

BELOW

Woman Wearing a Scarf

2005, watercolor, 10½ x 11½.
Collection the artist.



the still life,” she explains. “Painting is 75 percent thinking and 25 percent putting brush to paper. I first think about the role the background plays in supporting the objects at hand.” She then experiments with light sources and angles to add drama and varying perspectives. Only then, when she’s satisfied, does she shoot digital photos to document the painting’s “point of departure.” And even before the first painting is complete on a particular subject, further preliminary drawings allow her to explore and think about the possibilities for future paintings.

“Whether I’m painting the still life or the figure, I am committed to the space in the painting and designing ‘the rectangle’ in a pleasing manner,” the artist says. “There are

always problems to be solved. Maybe I need to change the palette and make it cooler or warmer, lighter or darker. I did that with the brass decanter, changing its orientation and coupling it with a silver scoop and tea bag and shifting the light to play off shadows and sheens of the decanter’s ebony cover knob and handle. In that series, I also played with the table line, the lighting, and resulting shadowing. All of these factors affect the dynamism and texture of the composition.

“I work most often in a vertical format and prefer the challenge of a square format,” she continues. “I do a lot more thinking than I do painting. I run through scenarios in my head. This kind of visualization is very crucial to my process. It is important for me to step back, reflect, and stretch my



LEFT

**Still Life With
Silver Scoop**

2008, watercolor,
21½ x 21½. Collection
the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP

Lotus Reflection

2006, watercolor,
22 x 30. Collection
the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM

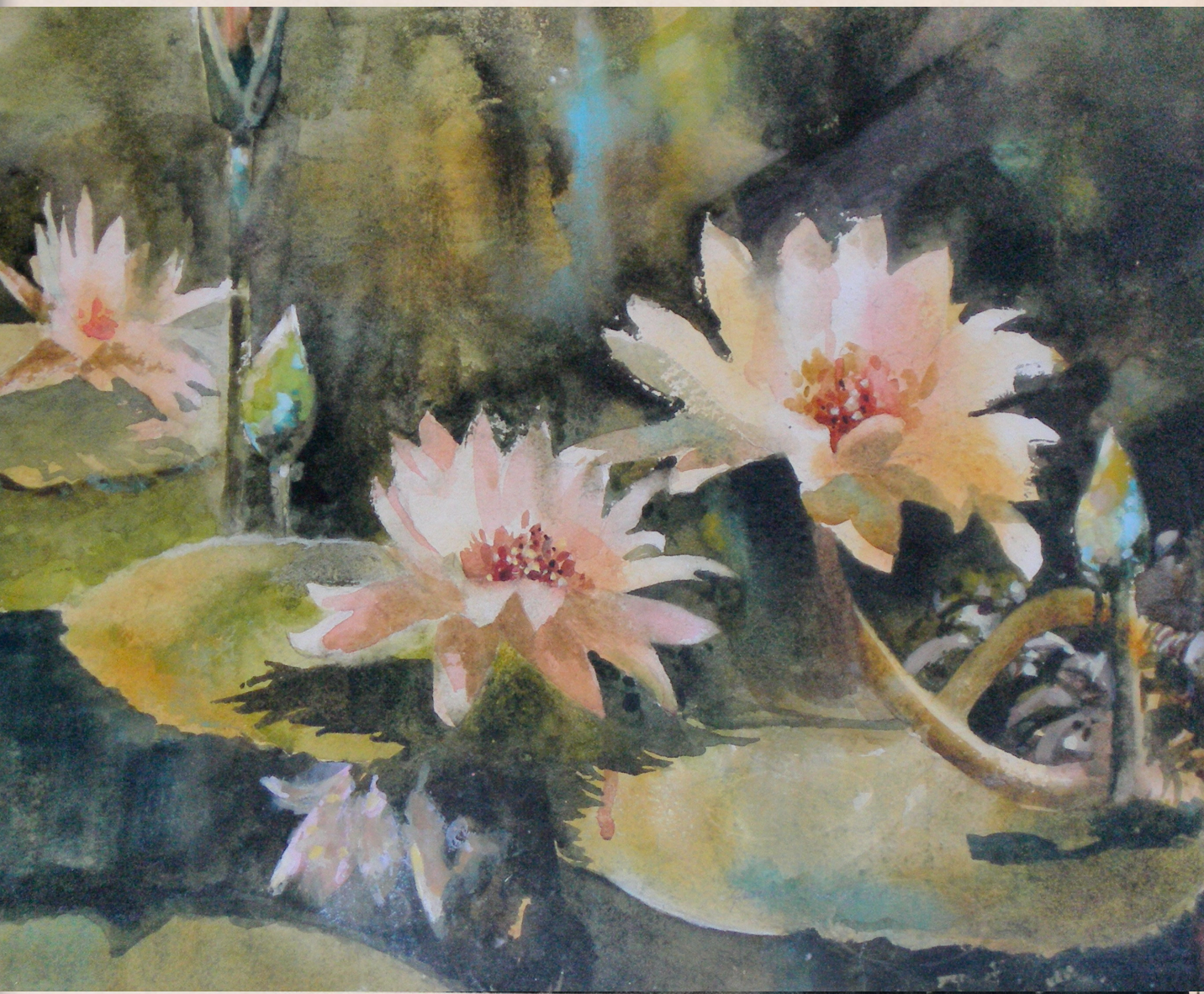
Bianca, NYC

2008, watercolor,
22 x 15. Collection
the artist.

pieces further with this extra step. It requires more time and patience, and perhaps maturity, but it works in my favor at this stage of my career. For me, it's never about hurrying. It's about slowing down and allowing things to percolate."

Gaucher-Thomas is inspired by many still life painters of the past and present. She notes in particular Giorgio Morandi's ability to depict subjects with great economy, attending to tone, color, and compositional balance. Among contemporary artists, she cites Burton Silverman and David Levine for the way they "continue to push the envelope for watercolor. Watercolor has always been preconceived as a delicate medium; and the work that they each create is very gutsy to me."

Gaucher-Thomas has taught privately and at various museums and organizations since the late 1980s. "Teaching has afforded me so many wonderful lessons," she says. "The palpable excitement I feel when a student hits the mark is extremely gratifying. It's that kind of camaraderie and exchange of ideas and energy with my fellow artists that continues to motivate me." She tells her students to follow her lead in finding something to learn from every painting, whether they consider it good or bad. "Maybe it's just a small area of a painting, but that one small passage might do it for me," she says. "And I'm able to bring that into the next painting and the next and the next." ■



About the Artist

Nancy Gaucher-Thomas, a signature member of the National Watercolor Society, is an elected member of the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club and the Academic Artists Association, among other professional organizations. She is also the founder and president emerita of the Art League of Rhode Island. She serves as a juror and instructor and has won many awards herself, including the Endicott Award of Excellence from the North East Watercolor Society. Visit the artist's website at www.gaucher-thomas.com.