



The Light From Within

Oil painter MICHELLE JUNG constantly tends a creative fire with new dreams and goals to fuel artistic success. This accomplishment is backed by a deep dedication at the easel and a unifying approach to composition.

BY Jenn Rein



“She captures the motion of the sea with lovely composition while giving an illusion of movement that’s so serene and believable, you think you’re there in person.”

JENNIFER HEIGHTON, DIRECTOR, SANTA PAULA ART MUSEUM

LEFT
Breakers
oil on canvas, 36x60

BELOW
Tide Pools
oil on canvas, 36x60

PREVIOUS PAGES
Silent Watchers
oil on canvas, 36x48

This intense focus empowers Jung to navigate the art world quite strategically, garnering multiple awards for her seascapes. Along with her skillfully executed color theory and compositional choices, the artist seeks first to understand her own creative direction, forging a path through clear and careful decision-making.

SUSTAINED BY SUBJECT

Knowing what is needed to get the artist’s job done is more than half the battle, and Jung’s attention to honing her skill set keeps her enrolled in workshops. This habit of growing by learning—and failing—taps into her competitive side. Her fiercest competitor, of course, is herself. “When you’re frustrated in a painting, it means that you’ve reached the point where you can’t solve the problem,” she says. “I set things aside until I’ve learned how to

At the age of 40, Michelle Jung found that, finally, she had time. Having just retired from a career in the insurance industry, and with her two daughters in high school, she had some room in her days to learn something new. First, she decided to get a black belt in karate. Once that decision was made, there was no turning back. As Jung herself explains, “I don’t do anything in a ‘kind of’ way.”

Her tenacity for achieving a goal did earn her that black belt status. She describes a moment in the ceremony: “One of the things they say to you when they’re tying the belt is, ‘Now, you are beginning.’ This is the start. That’s when you realize you can move forward. Before that, it’s all about the struggle. And with art, it’s the same thing.”

YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE

Up to that point in her life, Jung had found a way to use her natural creativity in almost every vocational role she occupied, but the role of full-time artist was something she had yet to play. With the encouragement of workshop instructors, Kevin McPherson and Betty Carr, Jung elected to take a chance on her own talent and begin an MFA program. Doing so proved to be life altering. “There was no one there to tell me, ‘This isn’t a good idea,’” she says, “and I’d reached point in my life where I was able to afford the courses and the time.”

The grace of good timing and opportunity have allowed Jung to focus on both the education and a full-time studio practice, and that time has not been squandered. After seven years working as a full-time artist, she has landed a solo museum exhibition. When asked how she did it, Jung is clear that the opportunities don’t simply appear out of the blue. “It doesn’t just blow by your door. It takes a lot of hard work and goal-setting, and you have to be really sure where you want to go,” she says. “Being vague on which path to choose wastes a lot of time and energy.”





solve that problem. It could be years before I even understand what that problem is, and longer before I realize how to solve it. People tend to disregard what's happening when they get frustrated. To learn, you need to hold on to that problem and that frustration, turn it around and learn something from it."

Pressing herself to do more while learning more, and thriving in that process, eventually landed the artist in the Teton region of Idaho at the studio of landscape painter Scott Christensen. After taking multiple on-site workshops with the artist, she was able to begin private classes. This eventually raised the long-standing student-teacher relationship to an artist-to-artist friendship.

The job of the pupil, especially a student of creativity, is to take what



OPPOSITE TOP
Sea Cave
oil on canvas, 30x30

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Kiss Me in the Morning
oil on canvas, 36x58

ABOVE
Rose Garden
oil on paper,
31¾x43½

a mentor has imparted and apply that knowledge to his or her own idea. In this case, working under the tutelage of a celebrated landscape artist has deeply fed Jung's artistic journey, and she has tremendous gratitude for Christensen's generosity as a teacher.

Unlike her mentor, who's best known for his paintings of the mountainous scenery of the West, Jung's inspiration is the sea. Her exposure to the subject began with a Connecticut upbringing. "It was only a 20-minute drive to the shore for us," she says. "I was a beach kid." It's an embedded experience that continued to feed the artist. Today, it's views of the expansive Pacific, near her home in California, that supply inspiration for her seascapes, and prior to the pandemic, it was a driving force for her painting. Like many people's best-laid plans, that all changed, due to the pandemic, in the spring of 2020. "I could no longer paint at the beach. I couldn't even run at the beach," she says. "Nobody could be at the beach."

With a new home studio just completed, however, and the gardens surrounding her home showing off promising buds, lush blooms and a deep variety of greens, Jung's attention turned to florals and vegetation as a subject. Her audience of fans watched via social media as her treatment of this subject proved to be as captivating as her depictions of water.

SEEING THROUGH FORM

Jung works solely with abstracted light and dark shapes throughout most of her process. "I don't do value studies," she says. "I create a pattern where the lights and darks meet," she says. "The realism is solved and brought to life through abstraction, and that abstraction is what creates the energy." Jung describes her approach to a floral as similar to a landscape, executed with the same attention to identifying the light and shadow as it relates to form.





LEFT TOP
White Lion
oil on canvas, 30x30

LEFT BOTTOM
Lily Composed
oil on paper, 40x40

OPPOSITE
Sisters, A Festival
oil on canvas, 24x24



Watching this artist tackle a canvas to produce a seascape reveals the manner in which she sees. Using a brush coated in transparent red oxide, the artist will strike the canvas with notes that meet deep shadow, methodically shaping the recognizable energy of a body of water. She spends the bulk of her time on the underpainting. Then she starts layering on color, which, she says, “goes pretty fast.”

Coming from an artist who once identified color and composition as her greatest weaknesses, it’s clear that she has put in the brush miles. The MFA curriculum changed her color cognizance and her understanding of color harmony. “Identify your weaknesses,” she says, “and turn them into your strengths.”

Although Jung is primarily an oil painter, she also works in pen and ink. Here again, she follows her urge to depict what’s right in front of her. “If I’m traveling and not wanting to haul all of my painting equipment around, I’ll just work on these little sketches,” she explains. She approaches the drawings with the same eye for abstraction, her method as direct as her intent to keep creating. “I draw lines and shadow,” she says, “and suddenly the image is there.”

A DEEP COMMITMENT

Capturing a moment in time on canvas while observing nature is a trick of timing and skill. Pursuing the ocean with its constant churn as a subject requires a special kind of commitment. The treatment of light on the water’s surface defines a large part of Jung’s skill set. The artist’s aptitude for harnessing the powerful



moods of water lends clear voice to each depiction, shaped around the personality of a rocky shoreline or the demeanor of a set of pounding waves.

Jung’s dedicated practice and her involvement in professional associations has been a worthwhile investment. After showing her work in a California Art Club exhibition, she was invited to present a solo show at the Santa Paula Art Museum in Santa Paula, Calif.

The “Making Waves” exhibition opened in June and will be on view through September 12. Museum director Jennifer Heighton says, “[Jung] has a lovely way of drawing you in with her tranquil palette, presenting the beauty of nature in a way not many are able to do. When we met with her about an exhibition, we learned that she had been painting full time for only seven years, though her work looks like decades of experience. She captures the motion of the sea with lovely composition while giving an illusion of movement that’s so serene and believable, you think you’re there in person.”

At once both calm and fierce, the seas of our planet illicit powerful responses—both sensory and emotional. The glorious expanse of the ocean, as depicted by Jung, becomes a tangible experience. To witness her ongoing growth as a painter is to see what can be achieved when attention and discipline is dutifully paid. ♡

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▶ VISIT MICHELLEJUNGSTUDIO.COM FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE ARTIST.



Meet the Artist

After many years working in the insurance industry, Michelle Jung decided to re-commit to her love of fine art and entered an MFA program, in painting, at the Academy of Art University, in San Francisco, which she completed in 2013. The artist serves as an adjunct professor for The American Academy of Landscape Painting, part of the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts in Old Lyme, Conn. She’s a Signature Member of California Art Club, an Elected Artist Member of The Guild of Boston Artists and an Artist Member of the Salmagundi Club. Her work has been featured in numerous juried group exhibitions, including the California Art Club’s 110th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition, in 2021, and is currently on view in a solo show at the Santa Paula Art Museum in Santa Paula, Calif.