

SPECIAL 25TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE (1999–2024)

# PASTEL

*Journal*

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CHANGER**

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That Caused a  
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SPRING 2024

# Going Within

**SARA GALLAGHER** PLUMBS THE DEPTHS OF A WOMAN'S FRAGMENTED MEMORIES AND INNER LANDSCAPE IN THIS WINNING, CONTEMPLATIVE PORTRAIT.

By Ruth Rodgers

**CALIFORNIA ARTIST SARA GALLAGHER BRINGS A SOFT TOUCH** to hard subjects. Using a mixed-media approach that combines the sharp detail of graphite with the gentle layers of PanPastel, she seeks to provide images that encourage viewers to explore their inner landscapes.

Gallagher, who studied with German hyperrealist Dirk Dzimirsky after graduating from San Francisco State University, has chosen to apply her talents to a specific purpose. "This work, like all my works, is part of my exploration of mental health issues through art," she says. "The process is what really brings the work alive. It starts when I sit down with a group of participants and listen to their emotional experiences. That experience anchors the visual representation, and it then propels the work forward through further dialogues."

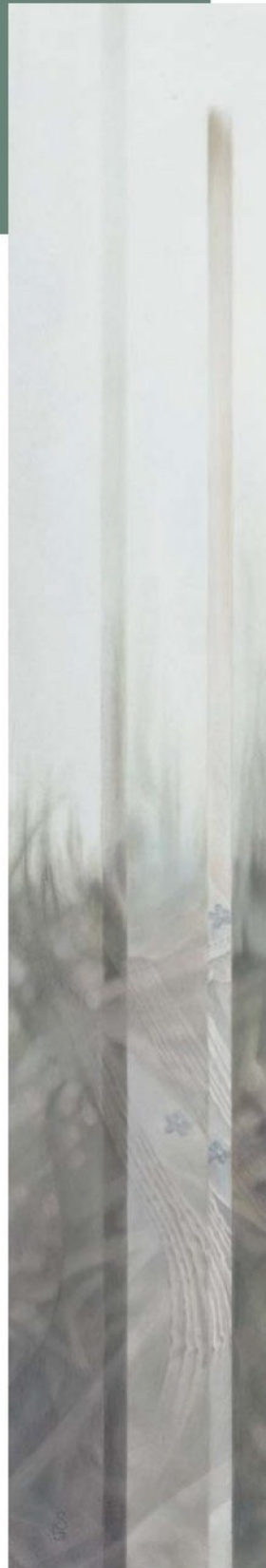
## FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY

The subtle mood of *Retrospect* is typical of Gallagher's work. "The scene depicts one of the many emotions conveyed to me through ongoing conversations with the model," she says. "It's from these authentic, vulnerable talks that the concepts reveal themselves. This work speaks to the fragments of memory that we carry within our bodies. We may look back fondly on a past version of ourselves or longingly reminisce on something that may have gone a different way."

Ellen Eagle, Portrait & Figure category juror, found the work particularly evocative. "The spare coloration of a woman wearing a wistful expression and an old-fashioned blouse—surrounded by grasses and the sense of a breeze—brings to mind the works of Andrew Wyeth," she says. "Unexplained color shifts throughout the canvas, the vertical structure on the left side and the ghostly design that dances across the bottom half of the painting enhance the mystery of the woman's retrospect. This thoughtful painting unites imagination with acute observation of life."

## SOFTNESS AND EASE

The artist suggests that the fragmentation and reflections in this piece are meant to convey "the pieced-together notions we have in our memories." Viewers can see subtle fragments of the model on the left side of the painting. Some are clearer, some more obscured. "It suggests a timeline, clarifying as it





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**Retrospect** (graphite and PanPastel on paper, 28x28)

second-to-last day, there was something about the face that just wasn't 'right.' I knew in my gut it wasn't truly finished, so I pushed through an 18-hour day in the studio and finally got the face to where it needed to be."

Despite these creative challenges, Gallagher says she's happy with the results. "My favorite part about working on this piece was getting to explore the abstraction of the blurred landscape in the background," the artist says. "Working with an out-of-focus natural element allowed me to play with color, shape and value." She adds that the area in the left third of the piece—"where abstraction and realism collide"—is particularly satisfying.

### INVITING A CONNECTION

In the statements she writes for each work of art, which she shares on her website, Gallagher ends each description with a question. "Ending with a question asks viewers to reflect on what comes up for them regarding the emotional experience or mental health topic at hand," she notes.

"My goal as an artist is to help break social taboos surrounding mental health, to alleviate shame, to help others feel less alone and to find connection in our communities."

Gallagher plans to continue her exploration of these sensitive topics in the future. "I hope to keep increasing my reach and impact through my art," she says. "I've worked with the disability community and underprivileged youth for many years, and I've seen how active listening, compassion and simple humanity can change someone's life. Bringing this practice into my studio has changed everything for me. It feels meaningful; it feels impactful. It just feels right." *PJ*

See Gallagher's Honorable Mention in the Portrait & Figure category (page 49).

**Ruth Rodgers** (ruthrodders.com) writes about art and artists from her home in British Columbia, Canada



ABOVE  
**What Once Was Yours** (graphite and PanPastel on paper, 20x24¾)

LEFT  
**The Work** (graphite and PanPastel on paper, 20x22)



**Sara Gallagher** (saragallagherartwork.com) earned her bachelor's degree with a dual emphasis in painting & drawing and photography from San Francisco State University, in 2013. From 2019–21, she studied under German hyperrealism artist Dirk Dzimirsky. Her work has received multiple awards and is included in public and private collections internationally—and even on the moon, and is represented by CK Contemporary, in San Francisco.



approaches the present moment,” Gallagher says.

The muted color palette is a result of the artist’s unique process. She begins with an underdrawing—a grisaille in graphite. From there, she layers on pastel using brushes and a soft cloth. “I go back and forth between the graphite and pastel as needed to execute the amount of detail that I want,” the artist says. “The detailing becomes sharper and sharper, almost like the act of focusing a camera lens.”

The muted colors are deliberately selected to further Gallagher’s aims. “My intention is to create softness and ease,” she says. “The concepts depicted in the works are about challenging emotions. A bright palette could be overwhelming or uncomfortable. My goal is to invite individuals to stay with their emotions, not turn away from them.

I try to create beautiful, soft images of hard things—to use the medium in a way that makes sitting with these concepts a little easier.”

The award-winning painting’s serene impact wasn’t easily achieved, however. “I had one of the tightest deadlines yet,” Gallagher says. “It required a consistent work ethic paired with a fairly good understanding of how long each section would take. Nevertheless, come the

**We See What You’re Doing Here**  
(graphite and PanPastel on paper, 9½x14)

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— SARA GALLAGHER