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# UNDER- WATER SPLENDOR

Inspired by her daughters' playfulness in the pool, **Michele Poirier-Mozzone** finds a muse in water's ability to blur and color the world.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

NOTHING IS MORE VISUALLY SPLENDID OR SENSUALLY RICH than seeing the dazzle of sunlight on the surface of a swimming pool from below. Meanwhile, colors in the pool's depths are softly saturated, with aqua and violet-blues penetrated by shafts of golden light from above. Add to this a swimmer or two—lithe bodies turning somersaults or trailing strings of bubbles as they play—and you have the makings of glorious subject matter. It's a setting that provides opportunities for narrative drama, adventures in color, and the sheer celebration of light and water.

In her pastel paintings, Michele Poirier-Mozzone seizes on all of these themes. Using her daughters and their friends as models, she has produced a series of work that is, at once, a joyous presentation of bodies in motion, a feast of dazzling color and light, and a meditation on human relationships.

## Adventures in Abstraction

As Poirier-Mozzone tells it, all of this came about because of a failed adventure in abstract painting. "Shortly after I started using pastel, I felt I needed a new direction," she recalls, "so for a few months I painted completely abstracted works without any planning—just free-flow abstraction. It was one of the most

Poirier-Mozzone PSA





**These  
Changes III**  
(26x16)

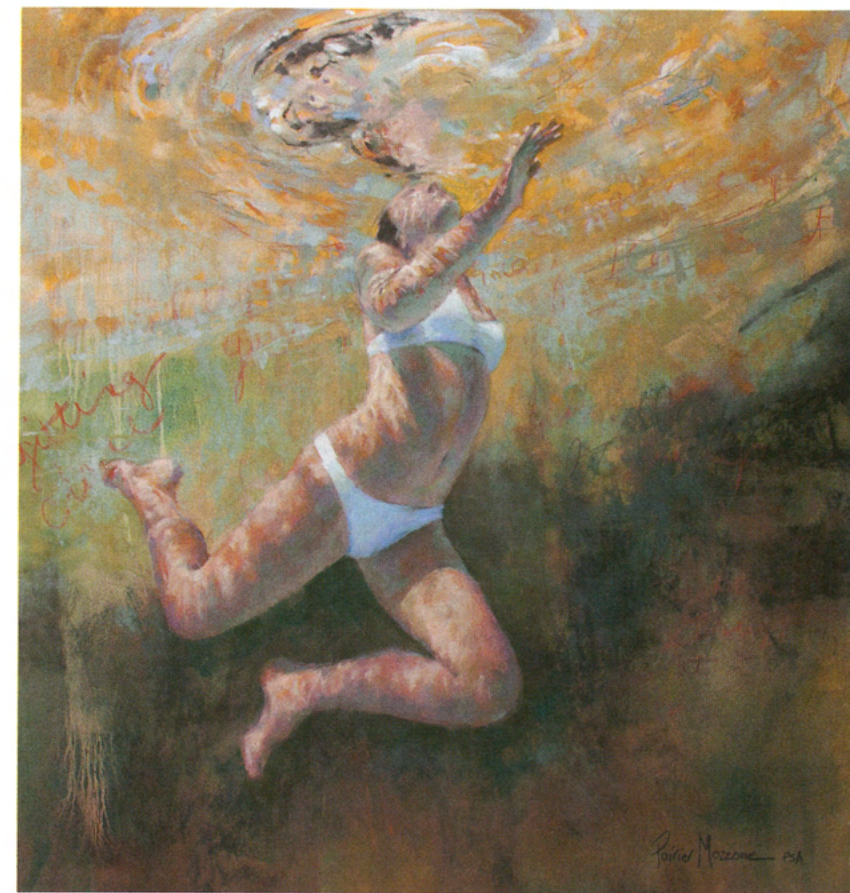
difficult, frustrating periods for me. I came away with many mediocre paintings and the feeling that maybe it was all a waste of time. I still hadn't hit upon anything that I felt could lead me into a series of successful paintings. I was in a creative rut."

It was in this rather negative frame of mind that Poirier-Mozzone found herself watching one of her daughters swim in the pool on a summer day in 2011. "I was struck by the ribbons of sunlight and interesting distortions affecting my daughter through the moving water," she says. "I was also keenly aware of catching this lovely, brief moment with her before it flickered by. I grabbed my camera and took numerous photos of her in the water in hopes of using them in a painting. Then it hit me: What if I tried to incorporate an image of the figure in water into my abstract paintings? That was the beginning of an exploration that still fascinates me today."

Poirier-Mozzone no longer uses abstract paintings as a base for her work, but says that the experience of combining figurative and abstract elements has given her considerable insight and perhaps a sense of license in her paintings. "Those early pieces taught me that I'm drawn to abstract passages of color and texture alongside gestural representation," she says. "I enjoy intuitively exploring patterns, mark-making and the interplay of colors, but I also love painting the figure."

#### A Sketch to Start

Poirier-Mozzone's working process begins with sketches from her selected video frames. (See "Using Video As Your Reference," at right.) Putting the frame up on a computer screen, she makes rough drawings in ballpoint pen in her sketchbook. "I'm a big believer in doing thumbnail drawings to work out composition and value before starting a painting," she says. "I have sketchbooks full of these thumbnails, and I record the date as I do them. It's almost like a diary; I can turn back months or years and see what I was working on at the time."



**Climb** (20x20)

#### USING VIDEO AS YOUR REFERENCE

Naturally, Poirier-Mozzone came up against the technical challenges of underwater photography as she began to explore her new subject matter. "I started by taking photos from above the water with an ordinary camera," she recalls, "but I moved on to an iPhone in a waterproof case to shoot underwater. Unfortunately, the image quality wasn't good, and it was hard to see what I was doing. My life changed when I bought a GoPro camera."

GoPro cameras are video cameras designed for use in a sports environment, providing high-quality, moving images even in difficult and dynamic situations. Poirier-Mozzone found that by going through her captured video footage frame by frame, she was able to select precisely the moment that interested her.

She acknowledges that video stills are a lower-quality image than a still-camera photograph, but finds that this helps her. "I'm not an artist who wants to become too nit-picky or detailed," she says. On the other hand, she laments the fact that fast-movement extremities, like hands and feet, sometimes look blurred underwater in a video frame. "Sometimes I have to draw my own hands or feet to give myself enough reference material for an image."





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## DEMONSTRATION: SUMMER LIGHT IN COLOR COMPLEMENTS

**Step 1:** Poirier-Mozzone makes a thumbnail sketch with references from underwater photography. She works from a still video frame displayed on a computer screen.

**Step 2:** Her work begins on UART paper with a light sketch of the composition in pastel pencil. The underpainting is a wash of oil paint. For each area, she underpaints a near complement to the final color. Thus, areas of water that are going to be green/blue are painted red/orange. The artist underpaints areas of skin with a dull olive green.

**Step 3:** The major areas of color are blocked in gently using soft pastel. "I try to keep a light hand at this stage," says Poirier-Mozzone. Plenty of the underpainting is left showing. She also writes on the paper as she works, a process that she says helps her to register what she's feeling about the painting.

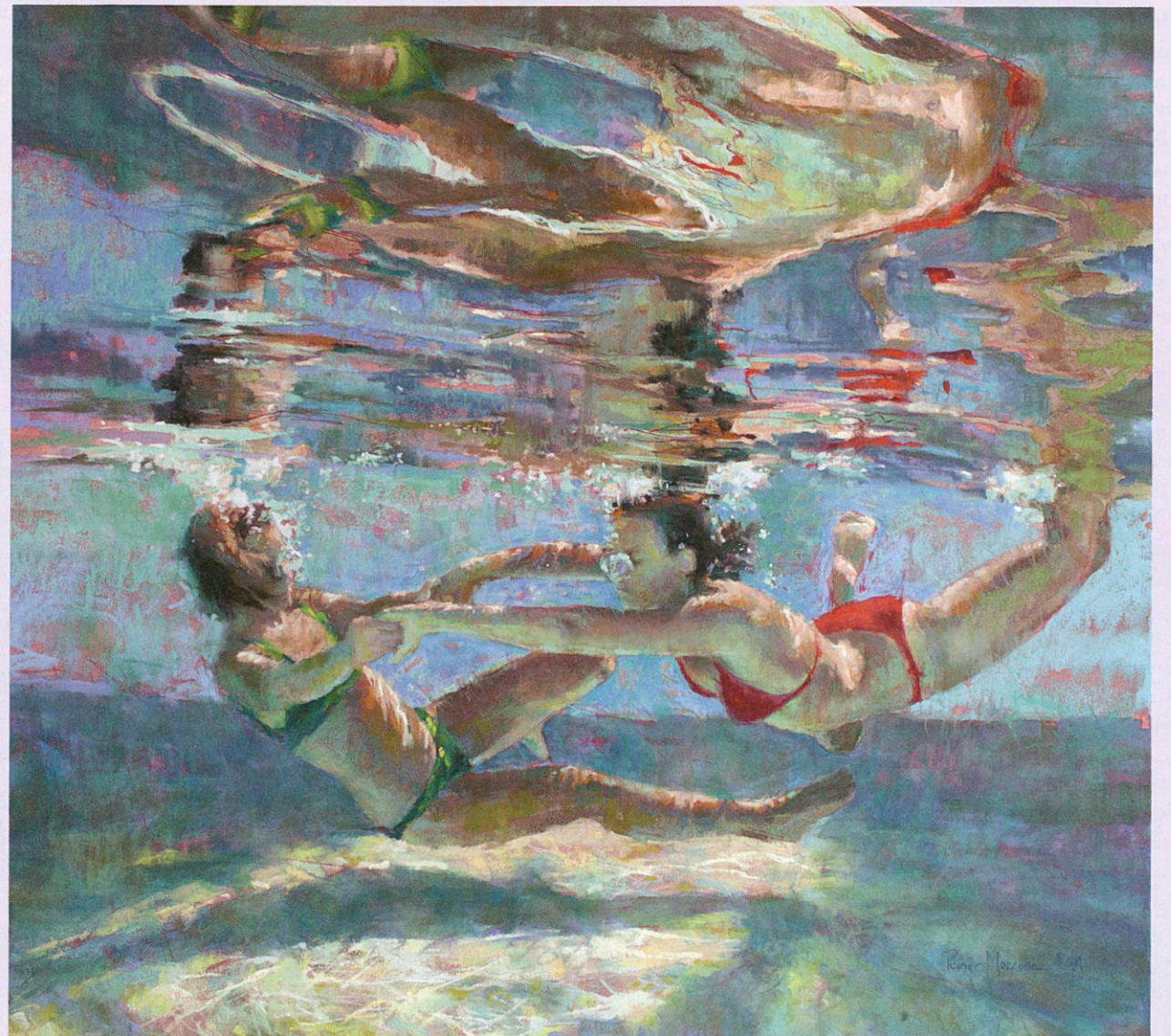
**Step 4:** The artist now builds more carefully into the figures, working her strokes across as well as along the form. "I begin to refine contrast and detail in and around my focal point [the figure in red] at this stage," she says. "I add greens and blues to the skin tone for reflected underwater light, letting them mingle with previous layers of warm color."



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**Step 5:** With the painting almost done, Poirier-Mozzone is still pushing the color a little, particularly the gold ochre on the lower swimmer's leg. She's also still struggling to get the patch of light on the bottom of the pool to read properly.

**Final Step:** The pushed color in the leg of the lower swimmer is adjusted and toned down. The patch of light on the bottom of the pool is reading properly, and yellow is added with a cool white highlight playing over the top. The water and figures are further enriched with thousands of small strokes. The writing is all but obliterated, although a few fragments remain, most noticeably on the floor of the pool.



*Alliance* (23x26)



Having developed an image in her sketchbook by simply blocking in the values with some rough crosshatching, the artist then begins working, usually on a sheet of UART paper. "I sketch in the composition in pastel pencil," says the artist, "and then lay in an underpainting in colors I think will complement the subsequent layers of pastel." In the case of *Alliance* (on page 43), she chose red-orange where the blues and aquas of the water would be, and olive green where the pinks and oranges of skin eventually would be placed.

For her underpainting, Poirier-Mozzone usually uses watercolor or oil paint brushed on thinly, a choice allowed by the remarkable properties of the synthetic paper she uses.

Once the underpainting has dried, Poirier-Mozzone begins to lay down pastel in broad, open strokes. "The initial layers are light and gestural," she says, "and I'm trying to maintain values." At this stage, the artist also leaves a great deal of the underpainting showing. "I want to keep that color action for later in the work," she says.

It's also at this stage that she begins to incorporate words and phrases into the image. "I write things that come to me as I paint," she says. "I keep it loose and playful, but it also helps me focus on what the work is about." Gradually, as she carries on, much of this writing becomes covered, so that, at the finish, only a smattering of fragments remain, a kind of poetic record of the artist's working and thinking progress.

### Refining Color to Finish

Having established her painting in broad strokes, Poirier-Mozzone now goes back through the image, enriching the color and working the figures with more care. Sometimes she'll "push" color, exaggerating values that she may later pull back. "The truth is that underwater photographs are very blue," she says. "I find that if I add in a greater value range during the process, I wind up, at the end, with a more satisfying sense of light and depth." In the skin of her

swimmers, for instance, the artist sometimes will add stronger ochres and reds before adding the greens and blues of the reflected underwater light back in.

While she's refining and adjusting the rendering of the figures, Poirier-Mozzone may use a slightly harder pastel, generally Nupastel, on top of her soft pastels. "I find it helpful when a lot of pastel is already on the paper, and I want to add a hint of color and do a little blending," she says. "The Nupastels are perfect because they're hard and allow me to apply just a little color but not too much."

The artist also is working on the quality of edges in the late stages of painting. "I really try to think about edges a lot," she says, "softening them toward the end. It can make such a difference, even if the changes are sometimes only very small." Like many artists before her, Poirier-Mozzone has discovered that a variety of edges can help to create a more coherent and atmospheric space in the work.

Finally, Poirier-Mozzone must decide when to stop painting and finds that she leaves different paintings at different levels of finish. "I'm perfectly OK with areas of the surface showing, and leaving large passages of underpainting and portions of the composition less fully rendered than others," she says. "In fact, I prefer it that way. Some paintings, however, just seem to require more refinement before I feel they're complete."

### Themes Within Series

While concentrating on the swimming pool as subject matter, Poirier-Mozzone has managed to explore a number of narrative themes. Some paintings feature pairs of swimmers, usually her daughters, whose interactions seem to speak to some basic ideas about human relationships and companionship. "The image I captured for *Alliance* struck me, not only with a great sense of light and dazzling reflections, but with the beautiful psychological and physical bond between the subjects," she says. "The emotional



*Absolution* (16x16)





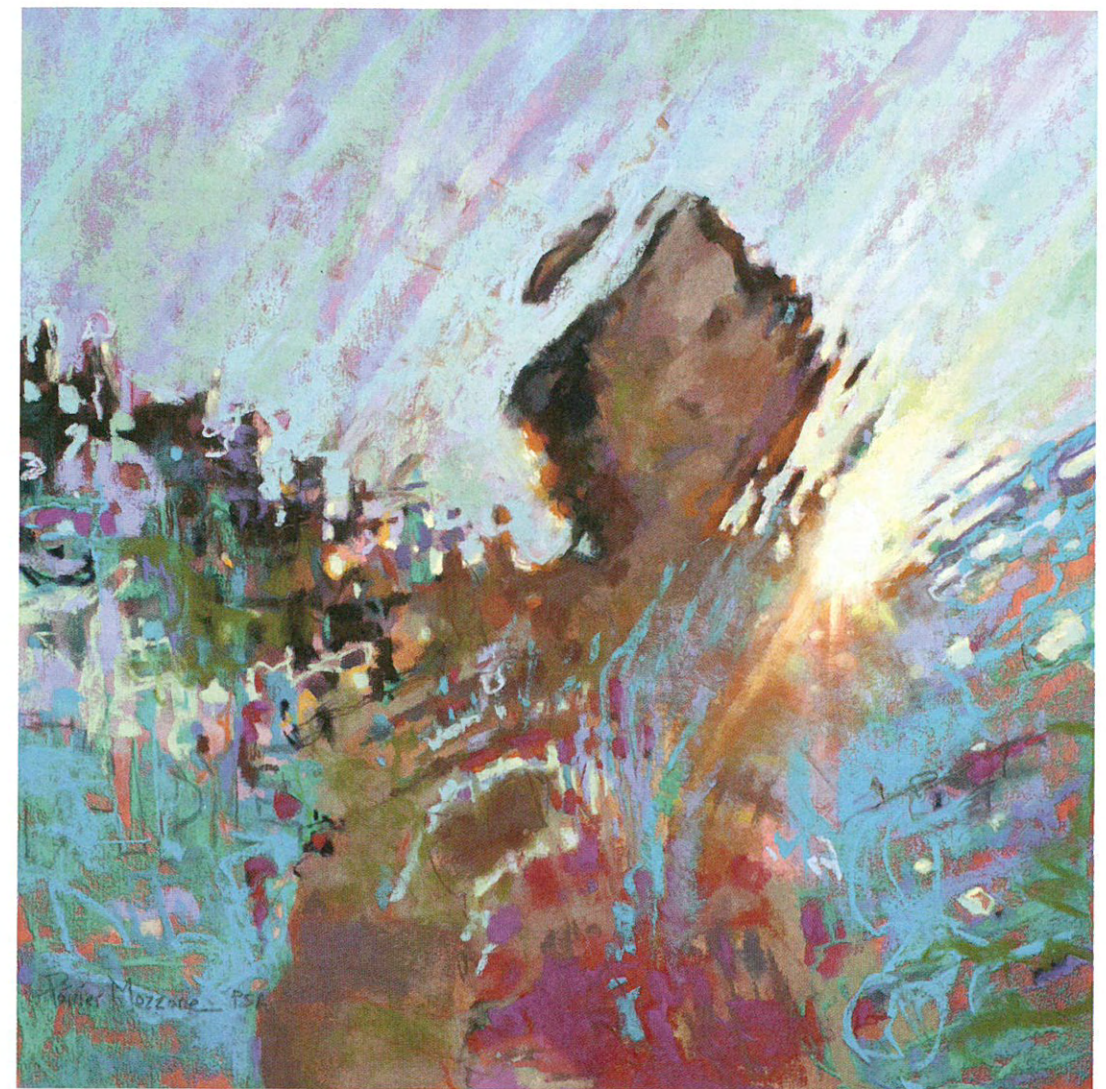
**Unbound** (16x16)

relationships are what the narrative is about.”

Other paintings, like *Unbound* (above), feature single swimmers who often seem lost in their own worlds as they float, sometimes with eyes closed, while the sun blazes down from above. In another series, which the artist calls “These Changes,” she features images of a more mature female form, perhaps the artist

herself, standing in a pool, as in *These Changes III* (on page 40). The viewer’s vantage point is from beneath the water. The figure appears extremely distorted, the body fragmented and twisted.

“This series was done in the winter of 2015 to 2016,” recalls the artist. “It was a time when I was having issues with getting older, and I just



**Realization II**  
(12x12)

internalized this series and made it about self-image and body issues. The distortion plays into this idea. I weaved into the fabric of these pieces what was on my mind at the time. In some ways, it was cathartic.” These images (see also *Realization II*, above) are also among the most adventurous the artist has produced, with their extreme distortions and passages of more or less abstract painting in the fragmented shimmer of the water.

### Making Connections

Whatever her theme, Poirier-Mozzone maintains a lively surface with fresh strokes, broken color, and considerable verve in her marks and gestures. “Uniform marks of the same size aren’t exciting to me, so I try to vary my strokes as best I can.”

In the end, after all the work and struggle to make a painting, Poirier-Mozzone is thrilled when she finds she has made a connection with an audience. “It’s fulfilling when someone sees

something in my work that speaks to them,” she says. “I’m reminded of a buyer who told me she hung my painting up where she’d see it every day. As she walks by, she’s inspired by the deeper meaning that she associates with it.

“Art is something so personal—we’re alone in our studios creating something from deep within us. To have someone connect with our work like that is thrilling.” ■

JOHN A. PARKS ([johnaparks.com](http://johnaparks.com)) is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York.



**Michele Poirier-Mozzone** ([poirier-mozzone.com](http://poirier-mozzone.com)) has won many awards for her work, including the Silver Award in 2016 for the International Association of Pastel Societies’ Juried Web Show. She’s a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and teaches classes in southern New England. She lives with her husband and three daughters in Rehoboth, Mass.