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WILD LIFE: ALICE JONES'S PAINTINGS EXPLORE THE LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY

written by **ALLISON PAIGE**
photographs by **DAVE CLOUGH**

TENNESSEE-BORN, PORTLAND-BASED PAINTER ALICE JONES is fascinated with the natural world and the machinations of memory. Her paintings capture expressionistic landscapes, real or imagined. Wildlife and the occasional human figure add sentience or scale, but largely nature speaks for itself. Dreamlike, contemplative, one senses a mystic's perspective, a dryad-like intimacy with the hidden circuitry of roots, stones, and rivers—a wildness tapped but untamed.

Alice received a bachelor of arts in visual arts from Bowdoin College, where she was the recipient of the Anne Bartlett Lewis Memorial Prize in Visual Arts. Group shows include the Center for Maine Contemporary Art in Rockland, and Cove Street Arts in Portland. She co-founded New Systems Exhibitions, a co-operative gallery space, and was the associate director of Dunes in Portland. She is represented by Moss Galleries, where her most recent solo exhibition in 2021, was *The Ground Beneath You Holds You*.



Alice in her South Portland studio, with her dogs Walter and Cedar, and two recent works, *Red Tailed Hawk* (left), and *Night Peregrine* (right). While humans rarely appear in her paintings, wildlife bestows a totemic quality.



Courtesy of the artist

Awaiting Their Return, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches.



ABOVE: Cedar, a studio mascot, relaxes among works-in-progress. **BELOW:** *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 inches. Gardening affords Alice close observation of the lifecycle of plants, a perpetual source of inspiration.



AP: Your work often blurs the line between representation and abstraction making it feel otherworldly. Is this a conscious choice or an intuitive one?

AJ: It's both conscious and intuitive. I enjoy being able to create spaces and objects that either only exist in my internal world or are skewed through my lens. I love uncovering those spaces, scenes, and feelings—so in that way intuition drives much of the process. I am drawn to works that take deciphering, which are a bit strange, a bit off. I am interested in that intersection of the mysterious and the meaningful.

AP: Humans sometimes figure in your paintings, but would you say that nature itself, and its inhabitants, preoccupies you more?

AJ: Yes. Some figures have crept into a couple memory-specific works that revolve around family and childhood. I haven't been working in that vein for some time. I've lately been more interested in the human-nature relationship with the human element being referenced in subtle ways.

AP: I understand that you are a gardener and raised goats growing up and still do! You have a strong connection to nature and animals. Does it feel important to depict both in your work?

AJ: To be honest, not necessarily. It's just the subject and language I feel drawn to right now. Although no matter what, I do expect that relationship with nature and animals to remain a strong and important one in my life, even if other topics start to occupy my painting interests.

AP: While many landscape artists work *plein air*, you often work from memory, depicting familiar landscapes, often of your childhood. Is your process more improvisational than methodical?

AJ: I work straight on the canvas, and, yes, the process is more improvisational than methodical. Sometimes I start with a quick and loose charcoal sketch onto the canvas, sometimes I only have a conceptual idea of what I want to do starting out, putting paint on the canvas and going from there. I find paint to be the most forgiving medium, so the canvas is where I like to work things out.



Courtesy of the artist



Courtesy of the artist

Chrysalis, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches, captures the artist's attention to nature's smallest inhabitants.
OPPOSITE: *Cosmos*, oil on canvas, 33¼ x 31½ inches.

“PAINTING FOR ME IS AN ACT OF REMEMBERING, HOLDING, PRESERVING, INVENTING, INTERPRETING, LOVING, HONORING, MISSING, MOURNING.” – ALICE JONES

When painting from memory, I pick and choose elements that feel fundamental to that scene and collage them together, omitting plenty else. In one painting of my childhood front yard, I made sure to include a tree I used to love that we had to fell, when I was around seven. It wasn't the focus of the painting, but an important element, nonetheless.

AP: Does painting feel like an act of remembering, celebrating, preserving?

AJ: Painting for me is an act of remembering, holding, preserving, inventing, interpreting, loving, honoring, missing, mourning. It is a way of connecting with the past as well as the internal and the imagined. I'm an idealist, and spend a lot of time in my head, so it's my way of making those internal worlds—whether memory based or not—into external ones.

AP: You work in oil, and your colors are vivid and deeply saturated. How do you settle on a palette for your work?

AJ: I think my natural palette is based in blues. That's my "happy place" palette. Sometimes I give in to that comfort, other times I purposefully want to challenge myself away from that palette. But I love color—that's a big part of why I like paint. I don't shy away from that.

AP: While some artists shy away from nostalgia or sentiment, those are emotions you seem to readily embrace. Nostalgia comes from the Greek for "heading homeward" so it makes sense that you would be interested in capturing the landscape of your youth. How do you manage to transmute that emotional landscape onto your canvases?

AJ: I've long been caught by that sentiment. I took Latin for seven and a half years, translating texts about places and cultures that are no longer. I spent a year translating the *Aeneid*, the story of a man losing his home, Troy, and wandering the world looking for a place to reestablish the fallen city. I felt that pain so acutely in those translations, the beauty in that pain. I felt drawn to nostalgia in *The Odyssey*, too, and all the other stories of gods and mortals experiencing hardship and longing for the safety and comfort of home, of youth. It's a feeling that captured me then, and that feels so prevalent and relevant to me now, having established my life here, two thousand miles from home, the land from which I was created, the land that has held my family for hundreds of years. I feel it, it feels good to study, so I don't shy from it in my work.

AP: Beautifully said, Alice. Thank you! I can't wait to see what's next. ■



Courtesy of the artist

CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: *Morning Glory I* and *Morning Glory II*, oil on canvas, hang beside a work table in Alice's studio; Paint splatters form a vibrant collage; A work table used for paint mixing and storage; *Red Tailed Hawk*, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches. "I've been focusing on birds lately," says Alice. "I find a connection there."; At work on *Night Peregrine*. Alice's recent works are often highly saturated with color; *Danae and the Creek*, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Landscapes, real and imagined, feature widely in her work. Says Alice, "I enjoy working from memory. It's a way of reconnecting with the place."

