

At Home in This Place

FOR **SUSANNE MULL**, ART HISTORY IS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION
TO FIND HER OWN RESPONSE TO THE WORLD AROUND HER. By Ani Kodjabasheva



In the vineyards that crisscross Germany's wine country, Susanne Mull sees patterns inscribed since the time of the Roman Empire. In a French bar, she sees Édouard Manet's famous painting come to life, and a scene with three women calls to mind a composition by 19th-century German artist Wilhelm Leibl. Describing her studio, Mull says, "It's a little bit similar to Adolph Menzel's *Balcony Room*." This reference to the 1845 German painting readily evokes the artist's serene, sun-filled space with tall ceilings, hardwood floors, and French doors opening to a balcony.

Mull's home—a 19th-century brick building with a top-heavy Mansard roof—keeps her connected to the past. So, too, does the wine-growing region of Rheinhessen in which she lives. Located on the Rhine River, this area was a stomping ground for the German Romantics. For Mull, this 19th-century movement, like the influence of Ancient Rome, is ongoing.

Mull's relationship to the past is close, but not one of nostalgia. Rarely does she lament what is gone. Instead, she shows, over and over again, that the scenes and characters we know from historic images are alive and well today. "I'm

an artist of my time," Mull says. "Life provides the theme. I'm an artist of realism." She paints the world around her with curiosity and compassion. Though art history continues to influence her, "like links in a long chain," as Mull says, she has learned from earlier realist painters that the aim is to use the past to better see the present.

A LANDSCAPE CONNECTION

When the artist moved three decades ago from the north of Germany to Rheinhessen, located in the country's southwest, she started looking for a connection to her new environment. "I sought to identify with the agriculturally structured landscape," she said. Walking in the soft hills of the Rhine Valley, she imagined 2,000 years of history, from the Roman conquerors who established vineyards though the winemakers

ABOVE
**Hommage an
Rheinhessen No. 25**
(23¼x37¼)

OPPOSITE
**Hommage an
Rheinhessen No. 4**
(15¼x23½)



of today. “The hills are formed and marked with a graphic attitude,” she says, and those age-old patterns helped her appreciate her “new position in that home.”

Mull’s search for a sense of herself within the landscape took form in a large cycle of paintings that she created over three years. The series “Hommage an Rheinhessen” (Homage to Rheinhessen) is spectacular in its variety of composition, color, light and mood. The series includes sweeping views of hills extending far into the distance until the color is muted by aerial perspective to a neutral earth tone. Towns nestle in the folds between hills, and here and there the Rhine River winds gently through the landscape, a mere detail in a scene of epic proportions.

Some paintings take an elevated viewpoint and build up layers of space to show the landscape’s astounding scale. In others, Mull looks up, pushing the horizon line down to give over the bulk of the picture to sky. Cirrus clouds flare up and out in a whiplash motion. As land stretches beyond the edges of the painting, viewers find themselves at the center of a majestic scene—in a world equally as enchanting as the one that inspired the Romantics two centuries ago.

The series, which brims with scenes of swooping valleys and open skies, is enlivened by another type of composition, in which the viewer is roving through the fields. In *No. 4* (on page 16), for example, the asymmetrical arrangement with vines tilting toward us suggests that we’ve just turned a corner on a dirt path.

Add to this the variety of lighting. “Hommage an Rheinhessen” includes all seasons and times of day; the colors range from the gilt hues of a morning in spring to an almost black-and-white rendering of fields by moonlight (see *No. 27*, opposite). Even within a limited value range, Mull manages to create a sense of space, the dark hills heaving towards the horizon.

In this virtuosic series, we witness the painter exploring a new setting in its every aspect, from panoramic overviews to dramatic close-ups. How does Mull achieve her impressively varied compositions? When walking in nature, she observes her surroundings in search of a place “where a landscape is coming to the point,” she says. Her goal is “to put a lot of information and a lot of feeling into one painting; to intensify, to compress.”

CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT
**Hommage an
Rheinhessen No. 34**
(19½x30½)

**Hommage an
Rheinhessen No. 27**
(26¾x38½)

**Hommage an
Rheinhessen No. 9**
(18½x22¾)



GETTING IT ON PAPER

The creative process for Mull is both spontaneous and deliberate. In her studio, she puts pastel on paper in a sequence from background to foreground, moving from large shapes to small. The earlier stages of painting, when she's laying out the major compositional elements, require her full concentration. "In landscapes, it's the perspective that you must not lose sight of," Mull says.

Whatever design approach she chooses to take, Mull gives her audience the impression that the scene is

arranged for them. Often, the foreground provides a way into the pictorial space and perspectival lines converge on the viewer. "Caravaggio and Caspar David Friedrich both take the viewer deep into their pictures," Mull says. Her landscapes, much like Friedrich's, elevate both nature and the human being.

OPPOSITE
Sunset in the City
(9x11)

BELOW
Construction Site,
No. 3 (25½x29)



FROM CRAFT TO ART

By painting the Rhine valley Mull gives a contemporary reading of a subject, imbued with near-mythical significance in German culture; however, she didn't set out to recreate the landscape's Romantic appeal. She came to the Rhine when her life brought her there. The situation was similar with the start of a series called "Mitte(n) im Aufbruch" (Downtown in Upheaval) in which Mull dramatizes a city in transition. Hollow new buildings rise out of empty lots and torn pavements, as construction cranes loom over the skyline. In *Construction Site No. 3* (opposite), a structure of steel beams defines an empty, dark space where a new building will materialize.

In *Sunset in the City* (above), sunlight falls on a bare concrete wall with gaping holes for windows. A courtyard, in shadow, is left empty—so empty that we can see the paper beneath the pastel. In a gesture hinting at both hope and hesitation, Mull has left the sketchy outlines of objects without filling them in.

Why this unusual series of dead-end streets leading to chaotic construction sites? The paintings show Ingelheim, a small community of 35,000, where Mull moved three decades ago. At the same time that the city

was undergoing major reconstruction, Mull was, coincidentally, going through a divorce. "I try to be a mirror of the world in my art. It's always interesting when my individual life or my individual fate meets general life," Mull says. In this case, "my individual fate meets the construction site." Mull felt her emotional state of mind matched what she observed around her. "You can see just the shells, the substructure of buildings. It's not destroyed completely, but it's just the shell of the new," she says. "You don't know what it will be when it's ready."

Mull believes that she only fully became an artist when she went beyond mastering technique and the "vocabulary" of art history and achieved greater self-awareness. "I learned to look inside of me," she says. "I learned that, there, I find the truth and the authentic." In her surroundings, Mull started to see a "bridge" to that inner truth.

This development came as a result of major life changes as well as instruction from other artists, including Richard McKinley in the U.S. and Dietmar Gross, a German painter who also became her husband. Mull called her path toward greater authenticity "a process from craft to art."

A PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE

Mull's figurative paintings firmly establish her as an artist of her time. These carefully composed images use everyday scenes to convey deeper truths about the present. *Three Women* (below), which won first prize in an art competition in Germany in 2019, reinterprets the 1881 painting, *Three Women in Church*, by Leibl (1844–1900). While Leibl's women are praying on a pew of carved wood, Mull positions her characters on a nondescript bench—a travel suitcase beside them. One is reading the Bible while the other two use a tablet and smartphone. Perspective lines converge somewhere to the left of the picture plane,

RIGHT
Barkeeper
(Homage an
Manet) 26¾x45¼

BELOW
Three Women
(40½x30)



where the women are facing as they wait, but the tightly cropped image and the black, Caravaggio-like background don't give an impression that there's much for them to anticipate. Light falls directly on the women, here and now.

Mull is a precise but nonjudgmental observer of her characters: "I'm inspired by Leibl's humanity and empathy in his paintings. There's no expressiveness. Just realism," she says.

In *Barkeeper* (above), we see Mull's version of Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Her barkeeper stands patiently, facing the viewer, with hands placed on the counter in cautious self-assurance. All surfaces

around her—the metal countertop, the glass bottles—gleam with a high shine. In this modern setting, Mull paints the individual: the woman's mix of pride and shyness as she poses for the picture with a half-smile. The barkeeper is of North African descent, as "we are a multicultural society in Europe," Mull says.

The artist is interested in contemporary scenes and characters that we may not be paying enough attention to. As boldly as Manet, she takes this modern subject to the proportions of a historical painting, at almost 2x4 feet. The size, she suggests, is meant to impart the relevance and the vitality of art history.

For Mull, art is a language, and historic artwork supplies the vocabulary. By using a familiar tongue to speak about the present and her own life, Mull finds her place in a long and illustrious lineage of art-making.

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Turn the page for a demonstration



Artist **Susanne Mull** (susanne-mull.de) lives in Dienheim, Germany, where she's an active member of a German artist association and serves on an art advisory board. Although mostly self-taught, Mull has received art training from well-known artists at home and

abroad. Her artwork has been shown in a number of exhibitions across Germany as well as at international venues. Her pastels have been recognized with a number of awards, including prizes in the Pastel 100 Competition and the Grand Prix Du Salon at the Salon International Pastel d'Opale in France.

demonstration Evening in Worpswede



Step 1: Mull follows a similar process for most of her paintings. To begin, she prepares the ground with a watercolor tone or *imprimatura*; in this case, she used a mix of burnt sienna and red. She then makes a sketch with a pastel pencil.

Step 2: Next, she puts down the first layer of pastel, working from the back to the front. She avoids working on figures and objects in the foreground, such as the tree, in the early stage. The first layer is a sort of under-painting—consisting mostly of the underlying darker values.

Step 3: Mull continues painting, applying second and third layers, following the same sequence—from back to front. Usually, she completes the sky before turning to the landscape.

Step 4: With the sky and background completed, she moves to the first layer of the tree, starting with the dark foliage. The last step is the application of highlights.



Mull's light-filled working space features an easel and array of pastels along with a well-stocked library and a small sofa, which attracts Chiara, the artist's Dutch Sheepdog.



Step 5: Mull continues to apply pigment, now working in the foreground. She says that, like in oil painting, she works in pastel fat on lean, meaning that she begins with less pigment—sometimes using a hard pastel or pastel pencil—and then begins to use more pigment with softer pastel sticks.

Final: Mull continues to refine the painting, adding finishing touches until *Evening in Worpswede* (11¾x18) is complete. If she's ever stuck in a painting, she walks away from it and comes back to the studio later with fresh eyes. "Being patient with myself is a priority," Mull says. **PJ**



MATERIALS

For a surface, Mull opts for either UART sanded paper (grade 320) or Sennelier La Carte in peach, sienna or sand.

Her favorite pastels include:

- Caran d'Ache pastel pencils, which have "an exceptionally velvety feel and great hues, including neutrals for detailed areas," Mull says.
- Schmincke pastels, which she describes as an "especially soft, velvety and intensely pigmented pastel line."
- Unison pastels, which, Mulls says, "offer great neutrals, especially for clouds and sky."
- Girault pastels, which the artist appreciates for the "very extensive shades of green for landscape."

