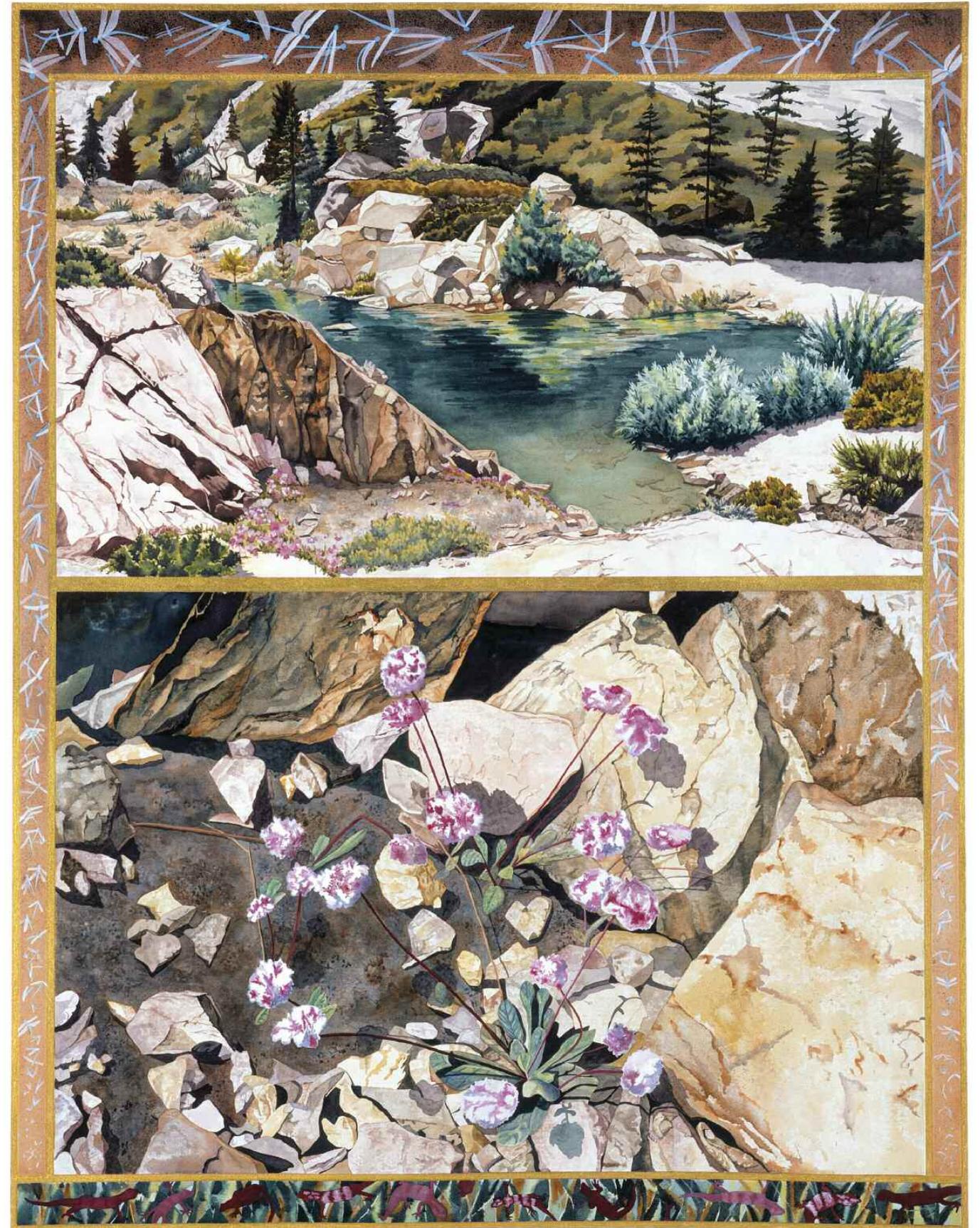


BELOW  
**Buttes to Tamarack**  
2006, watercolor and  
gouache, 18 x 27.  
Collection Peter Jamgochian.



OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Upper Sardine Lake**  
2006, watercolor and  
gouache, 48 x 36.  
Collection Sue Zimmerman.

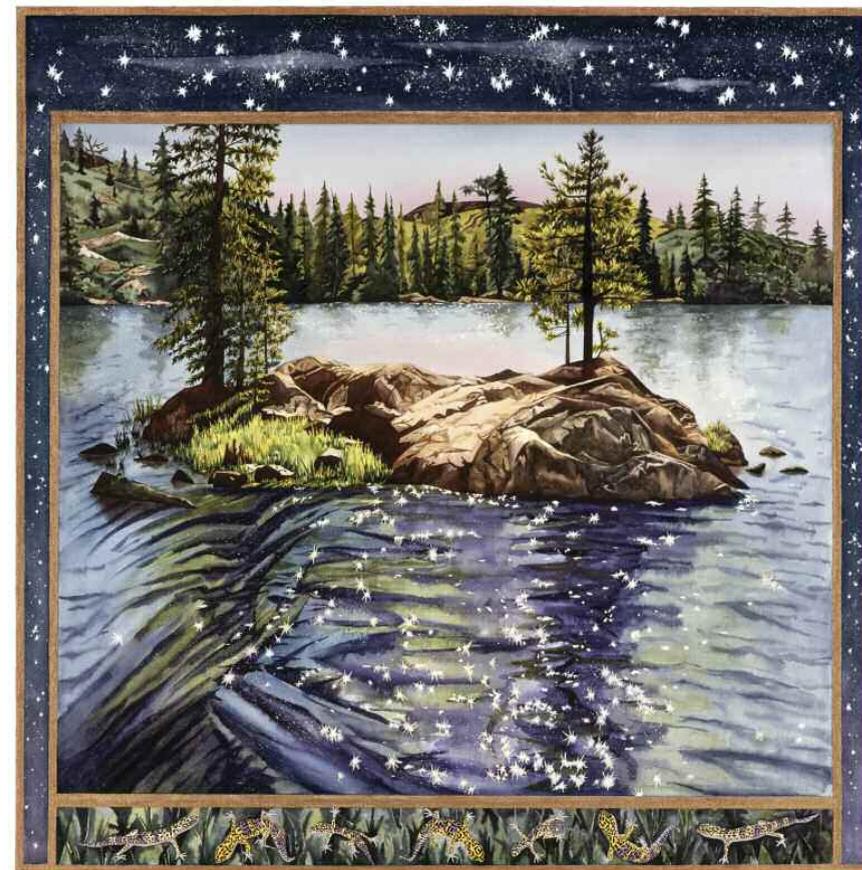


# Painting Moment by Moment

**Kay Russell** believes watercolor is a flexible medium, one that works well with gouache and other media to capture the spirit of a place. | **by Lynne Bahr**

The fact that Kay Russell teaches watercolor as well as uses it as her primary medium may account for her desire to continually learn new ways of working with it. For more than 20 years she's been a professor at City College of San Francisco, and in that time she, like most teachers, has learned a lot from her students. Interestingly, one of the chief problems she's encountered is not one of teaching technique but rather that of teaching not to be afraid to push beyond what is known and comfortable. "Fear is the biggest problem," she says, "and I've experienced it myself. Getting rid of the fear and connecting to the moment of painting gives one the power to be a painter."

Doing this requires an openness to possibilities, and some risk, of course, but Russell feels that approaching a painting with rigid preconceptions about the outcome is a mistake. By being open and making choices, an artist has much more opportunity to advance his or her skills and personal expression. In her own process, making choices is key, and this aspect is especially clear in the recent series she's undertaken.



BELOW

**Salmon Lake Star**

2006, watercolor and gouache, 35 x 34. Collection Buffy Miller.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Morris Graves/Rain**

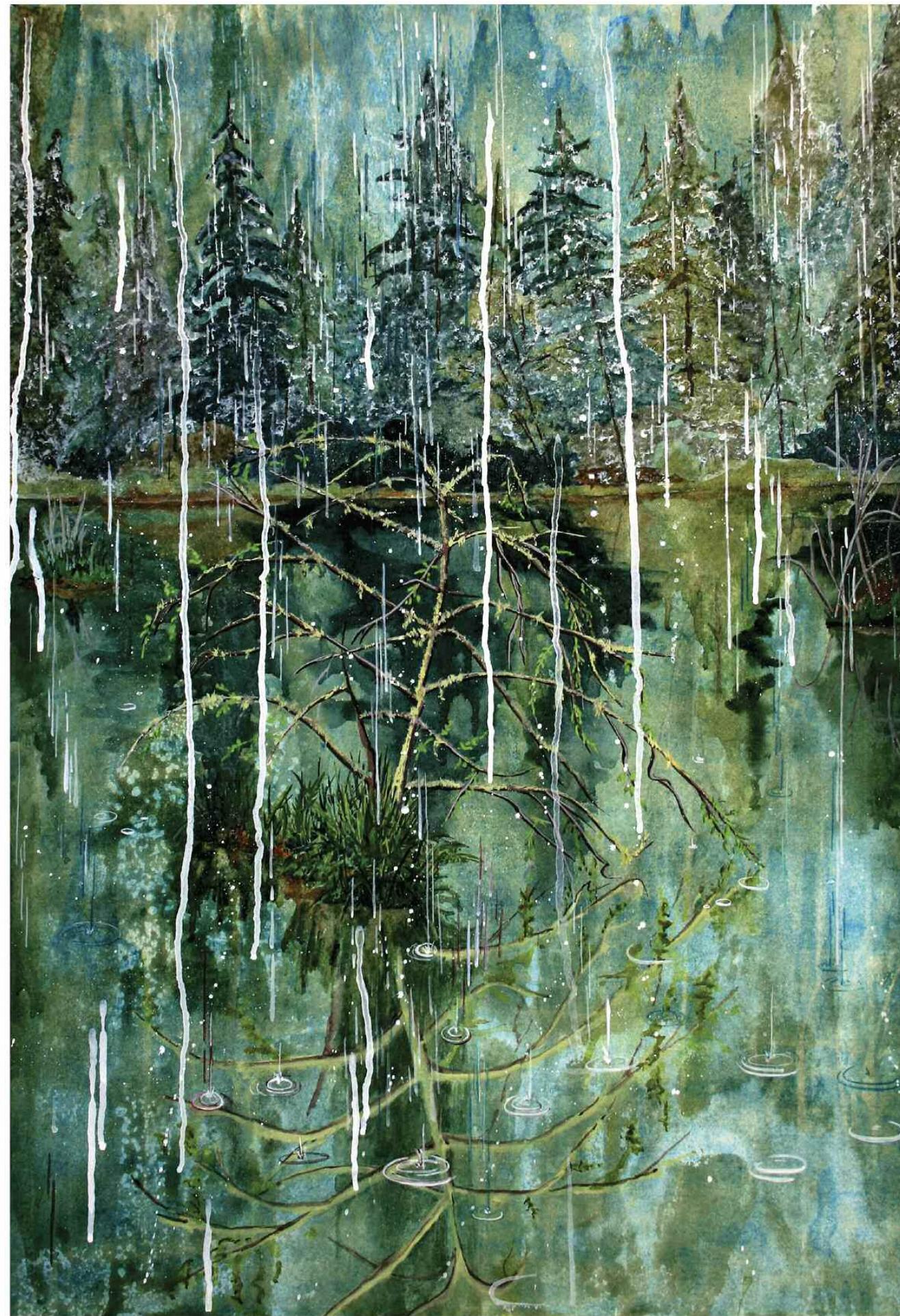
2008, watercolor and gouache over monotype background, 30 x 21. Collection Gail Block.

After establishing some basic parameters for the composition and imagery, the artist pushes herself to respond directly to the painting as it develops. She often risks ruining the entire painting by pouring, dripping, and throwing gouache over the image in an effort to find new ways of depicting the subject. In the process she has discovered new avenues toward interaction with the paint and an openness of expression that allows her to capture "the spirit of the subject," as she puts it.

Painting more expressively became important to Russell after working on a series of multiple-view landscapes for an extended period of time. Concentrating on the Lakes Basin area of the Sierra Mountains, in California, where she often hikes with her husband and son, Russell incorporated several views into one piece, joined with borders. She worked from photos except for the small rocks, sticks, feathers, or other found objects she collected and brought back to her studio. "I was trying to describe a more complete feeling of the atmosphere," she says of the series, "a larger view of what was present. I wanted to create a relationship with place that was more intimate than a picture. I looked for changes in light, close-ups, distant views, weather changes, anything that would help connect with how many different things happen when you really experience a place. I addressed these changes in different frames, with borders that contained details that related to the place—flowers, insects, footprints of a dog."

Russell began these works by carefully examining the printed photos and selecting images that related to one another. She then made multiple sketches in her sketchbook, experimenting with different compositions and determining how to arrange the pieces. "I thought about what represented the essence of the scene and how multiple images would work together compositionally," she says, adding that these initial graphite sketches were loose and focused on the impact of the forms.

Using a sheet of vellum, Russell next worked out a full-scale drawing. "Vellum can take a lot of abuse," she says, "so I can make a lot of changes while drawing." After transferring the drawing to her watercolor paper by tracing, she





OPPOSITE PAGE

**Bear Lake/Rain IV**  
2007, watercolor and  
gouache, 27 x 18.  
Collection Helen McKenna  
and Allan Ridley.

RIGHT

**Rocks/Rain I**  
2007, watercolor and  
gouache, 26 x 18.  
Private collection.

## Russell's Materials

### PALETTE

- an array of transparent, sedimentary, and opaque watercolors from various manufacturers
- Daniel Smith Lunar colors
- gouache

### BRUSHES

- kolinsky brushes in a variety of sizes

### SURFACE

- Arches or Fabriano 300-lb hot-pressed or soft-pressed paper

### OTHER SUPPLIES

- metallic powders
- gum arabic
- a variety of resists

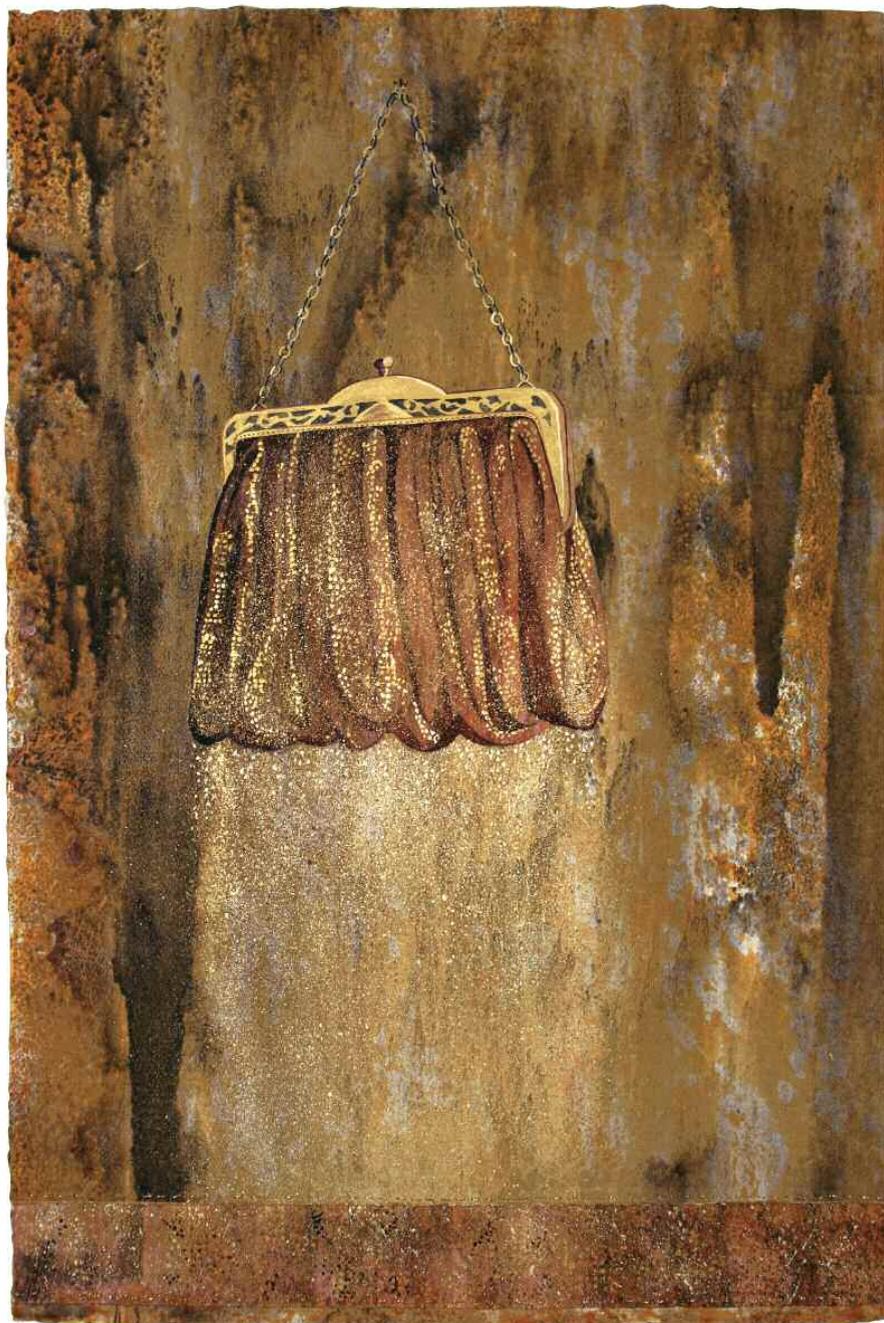


would begin the painting process. "I thought about the whites first," she says, "whether to leave them or to mask them. In areas in which I wanted to be more interpretive and flexible, I sometimes added gum arabic to the paint so that the layers would be easier to lift if I wanted to make changes."

When she was ready to begin painting, she pinned a sheet of paper to a large easel in an almost vertical position. She then laid in the lightest areas, allowing the paint to drip and run. "I wanted to loosen up the painting, right from the beginning," she says. "I blotted areas that I wanted to adjust or just let the others go." She worked wet-in-wet in the early stages, lifting some of the washes to make changes when necessary. She added the darker values and used progressively drier paper as she added details. If she encountered an area she could not change, she used gouache. She has strong views in this regard. "I'm totally in favor of using gouache with watercolor," she says. "I often

use it over the watercolor to build, change, and augment the surface. I learned how to paint in watercolor from studying painting and art history rather than following watercolor society rules. If you look at Homer, Whistler, Sargent, Burchfield, and many others you will see that they all used opaque paint in their watercolors, and they didn't sign initials after their names. They were painters. Like them, I do what I need to do to make a painting work."

Russell especially likes to use gouache toward the end of the piece in areas where opaque paint solves problems of light over dark and adds possibilities for spur-of-the-moment decisions. Foreground grasses and rain are two such examples. "Painting the lights between dark shapes, such as in grasses, is tedious," she says, "and using opaque paint frequently just makes sense and allows more spontaneity. You can paint over areas, make changes, and lift it out. Because gouache has gum arabic and chalk in it, when you wet and blot the surface,



LEFT

**Evening Bag I**

2009, watercolor, gouache, and thread, 30 x 20.  
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

**Sand Pond Reflection No. 1**

2007, watercolor and gouache, 12 x 18.  
Collection Alice Steele.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

**Sand Pond Reflection No. 8**

2007, watercolor and gouache, 8 x 12.  
Collection Peter Jamgochian.

freedom. “The photos gave me an idea that brought me closer to portraying what I wanted to convey in the multiple-view landscapes but never did,” she says. “I wanted to show atmosphere and quietude, to create a contemplative piece.”

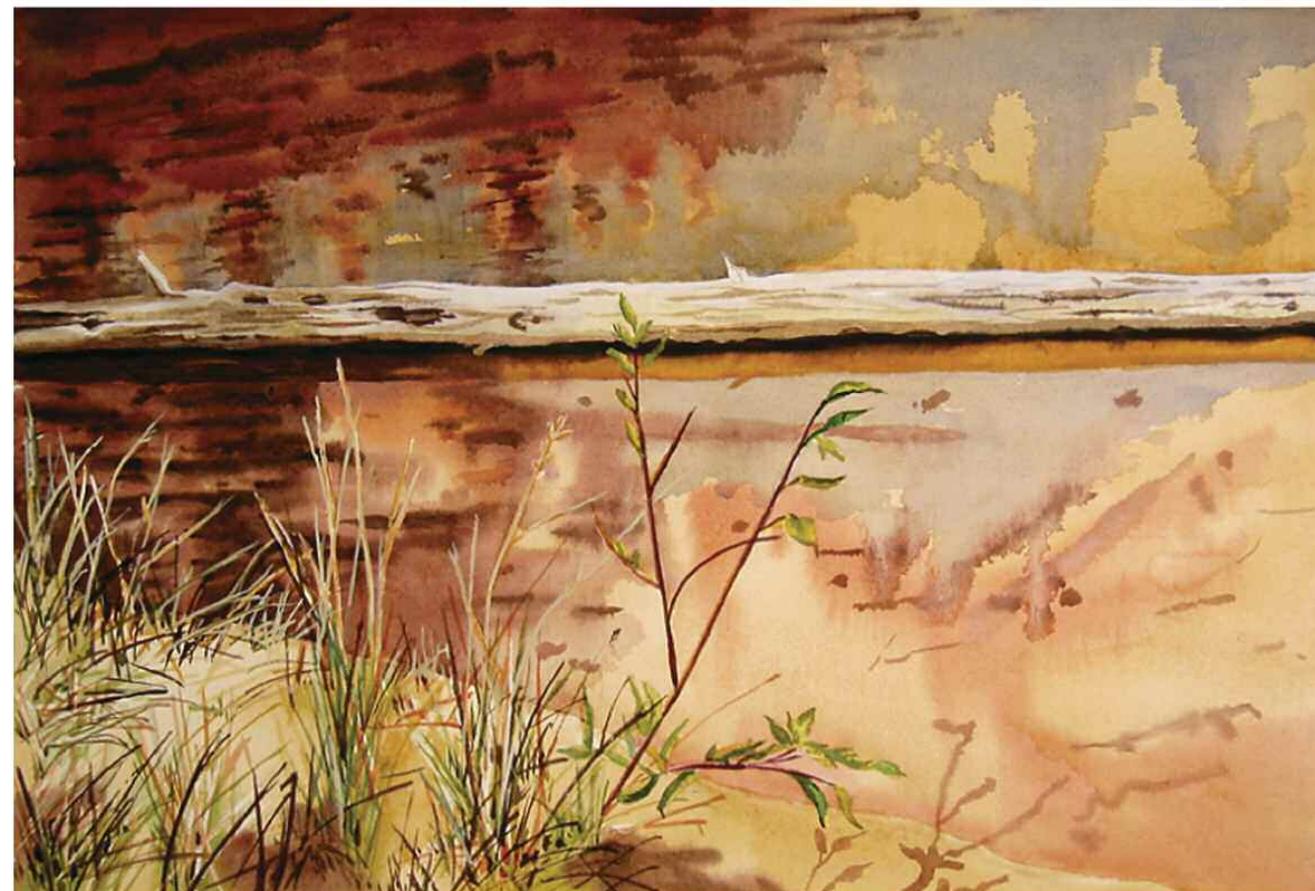
As in the multiple-view landscapes, Russell worked from photos for the Rain paintings, changing the palette to correspond to the muted colors of a rainy day. She would develop the imagery in watercolor to the point where the subject was established, and then she washed, dripped, and spattered gouache all over the surface. “I was taking the chance of ruining everything I had done up to that point,” she says, “and it was so exciting.” If she didn’t like the results, she would wet the area and lift it out with blotter paper. “I was totally in the moment,” she says. “I had to react to what was going on. It was so liberating.” At times she added watercolor pencil, metallic powder, and permanent mask. Often she added gum arabic to the gouache to make it even easier to lift. “I was just going for something that felt right,” she says. “I wanted to create a

it comes right off. This provides a lot of flexibility.”

A few years ago the artist began to feel that the multiple-view landscapes had run their course, but it wasn’t yet clear to her what to do next. A hike one day in the rain with her husband and son would provide the idea for the next series, although she didn’t realize it at the time. “I started taking pictures in the rain,” she recalls, “and I was having a great time. When I developed the photos, however, I was just blown away. They were surprisingly beautiful.” The drips on the limbs and ripples in the water and the way the rain obscured the landscape offered inspiration for a whole new approach, one that “captured the atmosphere of a scene but wasn’t precise,” she describes. Russell thought that the subject of a rain-covered landscape could create the opportunity to paint with more

deliberately ambiguous and poetic space.”

Around this time Russell was due to take a sabbatical from teaching. In planning this time, she began to research two artists she admires, Morris Graves and Chiura Obata, and decided to learn all she could about how they worked. She hoped she would be able to convey what she learned to her students, in particular their use of Eastern aesthetics in watercolor. “Graves and Obata had similar interests in that they both aimed to capture the spirit of their chosen subjects,” she says. “Obata painted in Yosemite and the Sierras, landscapes that were part of my life and art. Graves was well-known for picking small objects out of his environment—birds, flowers, and snakes—and not painting them pictorially but trying to get something of their essence. The work of



both Graves and Obata connected to my own intentions.”

During her sabbatical, Russell was the artist-in-residence at the Morris Graves Foundation and Studio, situated on 125 acres with a lake, south of Eureka, California. Graves’ former personal assistant met all her daily needs, leaving Russell free to paint. “It was an enlightening experience,” she says. “I was protected from the world and alone about 99 percent of the time.” Russell painted intensely during her residency. She had completed some paintings for the Rain series before the residency, but while she was at Graves’ studio she did even more, enjoying the benefit of rain, hail, and snow storms during her stay. “I could just look out the studio windows at the lake and the weather and paint on location yet still enjoy the comfort of the studio,” she says.

While at Graves’ studio, Russell spent a great deal of time looking through his half-finished paintings, materials, and tools. Primarily she wanted to know how he made the backgrounds in his paintings. They seemed to be dark with gouache on top, and she guessed that he made them through a printmaking process in advance of painting the subject. Before the residency, she emulated these effects by coating a sheet of Plexiglas with gum arabic or monotype base, then rolling and/or spattering watercolor paint over it and putting the paper through the printmaking press. She did this process four or five times with different colors until she arrived at the background she wanted. Drips and runs in the gouache and watercolor suggested rain. She would then develop the imagery on top. At Graves’ studio, however, she discovered an array of stencils and sponges that corresponded to the backgrounds in his paintings, and she concluded that he didn’t after all make the backgrounds with a printmaking process. Nevertheless she had fortunately discovered her own process for creating the backgrounds.

After the residency Russell continued the Rain series, and recently she’s moved away from landscape to explore other subjects that would suggest a feeling of both spirit and melancholy. Her mother’s old hats from the 1940s caught her attention. “I had made a lot of backgrounds for the Rain series, and I was wondering what to do with them,” she recalls. “For years I had my mother’s old hats sitting around my studio, and I could never figure out how to use them. One day I was just looking



**LEFT**  
**Bear Lake/Rain III**  
 2007, watercolor and gouache, 19 x 25.  
 Collection the artist.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Hat I/Rain**  
 2008, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil over watercolor monotype background, 26 x 20.  
 Collection the artist.

at the backgrounds and the hats caught my eye. I thought that maybe if I floated the hats on the background, they might relate to the melancholy, nostalgic mood of the rain.”

She began in a manner similar to the landscape Rain paintings. After creating the backgrounds through overlaying the multiple monotype surfaces, she developed the subject as far as she could in watercolor. She then used gouache to lay in some of the lighter values and added whatever the painting suggested, sometimes even glitter and metallic paint. “Again, there’s a lot of putting on and taking off,” she says. “I often used washes, drips, pencil, and other textures over the top. Just as in the landscapes, I was trying to get the essence of the subject, its spirit.” The pieces are not intended to be pictorial. “Like in the landscapes, it’s an intentional ambiguous space. The viewer wonders if he or she is looking at the rain or is in the rain. Some viewers have thought the hats were birds, because of the feathers.” Recently Russell has

## About the Artist

Californian **Kay Russell** earned her M.F.A. from Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio. She teaches watercolor and drawing at City College of San Francisco and maintains a studio in San Rafael. Recent exhibitions include “Watercolors by Five Bay Area Painters” at the Bolinas Museum, in California, and the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art invitational, in Napa. Learn more about the artist at [www.kayrussell.com](http://www.kayrussell.com).

started using her mother’s evening bags in a similar way.

To take a break from these intensely process-oriented paintings, Russell creates small, quick works of a quiet spot called Sand Pond, at the base of the Sierra Buttes. The pond has red deposits that create interesting color effects, and the quiet, secluded atmosphere has a strong meditative appeal. “Sometimes I need to do paintings that are fast, short, and immediate,” she says. Many of the Sand Pond paintings are close-up views, almost abstracted, allowing Russell to “get at the poetry of the place,” she says.

In all her work, the artist employs a variety of materials, with no particular preference for paint manufacturers. “I’m more interested in whether a paint is staining, opaque, granulating, or transparent,” she says. “The texture of the paint is very important to me.” She buys whatever suits her purposes, in other words, and incorporates a variety of types of paints in each work. She does, however, consistently use kolinsky brushes and Arches or Fabriano hot-pressed or soft-pressed paper.

Much of what Russell has learned from her residency and her series has informed her teaching. She encourages her students to try creating the backgrounds first, and she’s emphasized that gouache and other media combined with watercolor can be not only effective but can broaden the technical and expressive possibilities. Her point is to push the students to challenge what they know, to build upon their knowledge of materials and techniques, and to lose their fear of the results. In her own work, especially in regard to making the backgrounds first, she has benefited significantly from engaging in what she calls a “moving process” right from the beginning. “I like to add, subtract, potentially move from dark to light, as the painting progresses. It’s exciting, unpredictable, and very much about the moment, each action and decision leading to the next.” ■

