

FLYING SOLO:

The Sublime Oil Paintings of Brookline's Ellen Granter
by Barry Maloney | Dedham, MA

Brookline artist Ellen Granter has a history of focusing on specific themes that interest her until she has mined the topic to her satisfaction. In the past she has done clusters of work focused on flowers, bees, beetles, butterfly chrysalises, jellyfish, and most recently an interesting series of bathingsuit clad people playing in the surf at the seashore. Though her current reputation is most strongly associated with virtuoso oil paintings of birds and timeless beach and marsh landscapes, she has an unending interest in all natural life.



Granter was born in 1962 in New York City and grew up in Rochester, N.Y. Upon earning a B.A. in 1984 from the University of Vermont, she studied Chinese in Hong Kong and Beijing, received her M.A. in Chinese history in 1988, and ultimately moving to the Boston area in 1990. It wasn't until 1993, she says, "partly as an antidote to the constraints of a computer-intensive graphic design career," that her casual painting became something much more earnest and, perhaps, therapeutic. Yet there is an inevitability to her artistic re-awakening. She is a naturally expressive person, with a powerful artistic sensibility that demanded to bloom one way or another.

I was recently invited to her studio for a private viewing of new work. Her workspace, a third-floor brownstone near Coolidge Corner, is permeated with a strong Chinese aesthetic; paintings adorning every wall, both her own and her coveted personal collection of work by favorite artists. In the dining area, dozens of newly finished canvases stand on end, leaning one on another, awaiting their unveiling.

Viewing her luminous images, we are transported, each image displaying an uncanny ability to draft the willing volunteer into the contemplation of time in motion. Her landscape paintings are like poems by Wordsworth; heavy with thought, yet expansive in spirit. Still lifes, animals, and her immortal birds all drawn with compassion and insight, even painting our fellow humans, chubby and clad in ridiculously patterned bathing suits, with a clear-eyed objectivity. Instead of harsh psychological judgement, we are instead treated to an accepting view of ourselves standing shin deep in the tide, playing, talking or simply looking off into the distance. These images are curiously reminiscent of her many images of clustered birds perched on a telephone wire, relating us all as fragile living beings.

Each image takes its viewer to a place in time, yet her technique of slightly blurring edges between positive and negative space gives us the impression that here time is not still, but in flux. Working quickly, she combines a simplicity of composition and

complexity of emotion and texture to great effect. I am reminded of a quote by John Constable: "In a sketch, there is nothing but one state of mind - that which you were in at the time (of creation)." Yet somehow Ellen Granter manages to make paintings – each one a completely realized oil work – retain that sense of immediacy of experience. It is less a traditional painting that is built-up and more of a modern painting that simply pours out of the artist. Asked about this approach,

Granter replied "I work very quickly, trying to get everything I am thinking about into the painting as fast as possible, then I try to sustain my interest in it until it is done, or it is done when I'm through thinking about it. Going back into it after it is dry is always problematic because more often than not I am not thinking about the painting in as focused a way, or with the same light as on the first sessions."



Having spent time living in China and Hong Kong, she was influenced by Eastern concepts of visual beauty, studying Chinese and Japanese art. Her work, though obviously informed by Impressionism, and showing the influences of Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn, is much more than the sum of her art-history-knowledge parts. She has an uncanny gift for turning surface texture into an aesthetic pleasure, creating delicious paintings that we wish to eat, like some strange form of visual pastry. Using a distinctive impasto technique and knowledge of the effect of calligraphic sweep and dance motion, she creates glorious surface play, leaving many places for the eye to dwell in and delight. We see color as matter, and volume portrayed as dimensional light.



No review of Ellen Granter would be complete without a mention of the subject of birds. These paintings in particular read like zen poems or haiku, where the combination of small bits of information are arranged in such a way that the composition comes to completion in the viewers mind, bringing about those attendant aesthetic highs. Showing a thorough knowledge of avian anatomy, her greatest technical feat is the ability to portray that featherweight lightness of small birds, conveying the near weightlessness of

their bones. Sparrows, perched on the line of a fence like musical notes across the page of a Chopin composition offer us a glimpse of ethereal beauty. Asked about her personal conception of a successful piece, Granter has said: "a beautiful painting is both a gift of vision and a testament of appreciation for our short lives."