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## Magical Landscapes *Norman Kolpas*

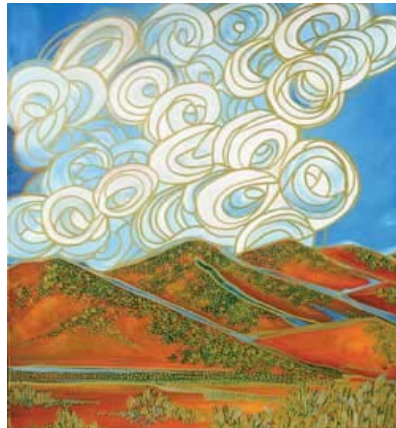
### Artist Jami Tobey's paintings defy easy categorization

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Look at paintings by Jami Tobey and many stylistic labels flash through your mind. Her paintings seem impressionistic, capturing scenes and images through loose composition, vibrant colors, fluid movement, and shifting light. Yet the simplified shapes and flattened depth of field also seem to speak of comic-book-inspired pop art. Look again and the recognizable images of trees and landscapes all but disappear, so entralling are the active swirling shapes that just beg to be called abstract expressionist.

Many of those swirls are outlined with strokes of metallic gold ink that evoke the seams of a church window; each vivid field of color appears to glow translucently like stained glass. And then, the golden lines and dots seem to morph into the rhythmic patterns of an Australian Aboriginal painting, capturing the very pulse of ancient spirits.

Tobey's acrylics on canvas bring so many labels to mind because they defy simple pigeonholing. The artist laughs when asked to come up with her own description, finally settling on a hybrid answer: "I would say my style is contemporary impressionist, with the influence of abstraction." In the next breath, she cites yet another influence, the neo-expressionism of the late, phenomenally successful New York graffiti-artist-turned-painter Jean-Michel Basquiat. "He was big on lines and details, too," she notes. "I've always liked his work."



And what about those recognizable Australian lines and details? "People point that out all the time," she says, "and I find it fascinating, not because it's intentional, which it isn't, but because my father was really into Aboriginal art toward the end of his life."

Gene Tobey, who passed away in 2006 at the age of 60, was a noted sculptor. During the last decade of his life, he collaborated with his wife, Jami's stepmother, Rebecca, on highly stylized animal bronzes that incorporated native designs and patterns. "My dad felt a deep connection to Aboriginal art," says Jami. "So hearing people recognize it in my work is an interesting link back to him."

Jami, born in Oregon in 1974, grew up inextricably linked to artistic pursuits. "By the time I was in kindergarten, I had shown an aptitude for art, and I was always encouraged to do it," she says. She spent her preteen and teen years with her dad and stepmom in Santa Fe. "I got

to see everything, a million different kinds of subjects and styles and techniques," she says. Not surprisingly, Georgia O'Keeffe became one of her favorite painters. "I liked the way she took an image and made it simple, almost abstract. I wanted to express myself in that way."

In a household and a city devoted to art, Jami wasn't the only Tobey child to feel its calling; her younger brother, Joshua, is a noted sculptor, and though her older brother, Chris, doesn't work in the arts, "he's creative in his own way, too."

Words were also important to Tobey, who grew up passionate about reading and writing. This interest she attributes to her mother, Toni Williams, who taught speech communications and is "a great writer." So, when the time came for Jami to enter Western State College in Gunnison, CO, she planned to major in English and pursue a career in journalism.

That all changed halfway through her freshman year. "We had to take an arts elective, and I chose oil painting," she recalls. "It was love at first brush stroke. By the end of the year, I went to my guidance counselor and said, 'I need to have a double major.'" Over the next three years, while also getting her fill of writing and literature, she worked extensively in oils and watercolors, focusing primarily on landscapes.

In college, she met her husband, Mitch Kiendra, and after graduating they moved to his hometown of San Diego. There she found work as a third-grade teacher. "What do you do as an English and art major?" she asks with a chuckle. "You teach!" Though devoted to her students, Tobey remained intent on pursuing a career in art. "I was the prolific evening painter. I'd come home at night and just paint and paint and paint. In five years I didn't produce anything for anyone other than myself. I probably did 200 to 300 paintings. My ultimate goal was to paint professionally and show in galleries."

Despite that drive, her biggest challenge at first was focus. "I wanted to do mosaics, and stained glass, and other things, too. The list went on and on," she remembers. "But then my dad said to me, 'Jami, you have to pick one thing and get really good at it.'" Her love of painting prevailed. At the same time, she found ways to incorporate her other passions into her brushwork: "I began drawing on my paintings with metallic ink, and they started to look like stained glass."

Motherhood brought still more focus to her work, in ways both predictable and unforeseen. Jami and Mitch have two children, a daughter who's 6 and a son, age 8. When her son was 2 years old, he was diagnosed with autism. "That was the big cosmic push," says Tobey. "When a child has special needs, it's hard to work a nine-to-five job." So she quit teaching to be home with her son. "I would put him bed at 7:30 and then stay up and paint until midnight." She also transitioned away from oils to acrylics. "Those turpentine fumes just aren't good to have around the kids," she explains.

Now working in acrylic, a medium known for its vividness and quick-drying capabilities, Tobey says her work has gotten bigger and bolder. "Acrylic is just more interesting to me," she explains. "I can do a lot more with texture and with the contrasts between light and dark. The possibilities are never ending." By late 2004, she had obtained her first gallery representation, with Adagio Galleries in Palm Desert, CA. Others soon followed.



Five years after her first show, Tobey is more energized than ever about the possibilities her work presents. She is producing bigger, more vivid paintings—landscapes with vast skies and swirling clouds, and treescapes overflowing with a primal energy that makes them feel almost like magical totems. "Trees are so hopeful, a symbol of regrowth," says the artist.

Tobey always has two or three paintings going at once in the spare room that serves as her home studio in Murrieta, a small community about 65 miles north of San Diego, where they now live. Depending on size and complexity, each piece can take anywhere from a few days

to two weeks to complete. She begins the process by combing through the “tons of photos and sketches” she makes during her family’s travels. Still a devotee of words, she also jots down notes, like “last night’s sky had big fluffy pink cotton-candy clouds.”

Details large and small find their way into the sketches that she lays out on her desk. “One will always draw me in more than the others,” she says, noting that 50 drawings might lead to 10 paintings. Next, she’ll gesso her canvas and begin to paint: first the primary object, be it a mountain, a farmhouse, or a tree; next she works on the sky—“that’s a huge, passionate element”; and then she finishes the foreground.

Then comes the final step, “the time-consuming, very special part,” that brings such distinction to her work. “I go back in with gold ink and I add all the outlines and dots and swirls and patterns, which pulls the painting’s symmetry together.” The work is meticulously detailed, even wrapping around the edges of the canvases so the paintings can be hung without frames. “They definitely stand on their own,” says Tobey. “I want people to love the edges. It’s another element of ‘wow!’”

She is eager to portray that wonderment in other kinds of subjects as well. “I’d love to do a guitar series, not just painting them on canvas, but also painting on actual guitars, like they are the canvas,” she says. “And birds have potential, especially in huge skies.”

The possibilities seem as limitless as those big skies. “My art is in constant evolution. People who collect me can see how fast things change in a year. Right now I’m seeing an Asian influence in my work that hasn’t been there before. The paintings are a little bit more simplified,” says the label-resistant artist. “I’m excited to see what I’ll be doing two years from now. And I’ll be interested to see what I’m painting when I’m 65!”

*Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for Mountain Living and Colorado Homes & Lifestyles as well as Southwest Art.*

#### Dossier

##### Representation

Adagio Galleries, Palm Desert, CA; Gallery 822, Santa Fe, NM; Redstone Gallery, Park City, UT; Rain Dance Gallery, Durango, CO; [www.jamitobestudios.com](http://www.jamitobestudios.com).

##### UPCOMING SHOWS

Group show, Gallery 822, November 28-December 31. Two-person show with Joshua Tobey, Adagio Galleries, January 9-February 12, 2010.

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