

For celebrated actress **Kim Novak**, painting has always provided a wonderful escape, allowing her to explore the world of nature and her own imagination.

BY ANNE HEVENER

# an inner world

LEGENDARY FILM ACTRESS **KIM NOVAK** MAY BE BEST KNOWN for her starring roles in Hollywood classics such as the 1958 Hitchcock thriller *Vertigo* and the romantic comedy *Bell, Book and Candle*, but in recent years, the actress has been garnering praise for another creative talent—painting. Although she’s an accomplished painter in a variety of media, pastel is a favorite, and Novak’s work in the medium was celebrated this past summer with a solo exhibition at The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio.

Painting provides Novak an outlet for a vigorous and imaginative inner world. Her portraits, interiors and landscapes are personal and emotionally potent, expressing the artist’s unique vision, her connectivity to nature and spirituality, and her passion for life. Dr. Louis Zona, director of The Butler, describes her work this way: “Part of the appeal of Kim Novak’s art is that sense of the ethereal. She utilizes the unique qualities

of the pastel medium to present a sense of altering states. Surrealism meets traditional realism in an effect that’s anything but static. Images meld into other images, and the effect is at once classically beautiful and wondrously mysterious.”

## Making Art a Part of Life

Like many painters, Novak’s fascination with art began in childhood. “I was never a great student in school,” she says, “but I did excel in art.” Both she and her sister, who grew up on the south side of Chicago, earned scholarships to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. “That was really special,” Novak says, “getting to take the ‘L’ and go downtown to study.” Receiving that recognition affirmed her dream of one day becoming an artist, but a summer trip to Hollywood for a modeling job changed all that. While there, Novak was discovered by a talent agent in the film industry and signed to Columbia Pictures.

**Mountain Man**  
(16x12)



*Horse Heaven* (12x16)

*Tides of Humanity* (opposite; 16x12)

## THE HEALING ARTS

Last summer, The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, presented an exhibition of 27 of Novak's pastel paintings as part of the museum's "Art & Healing" programming. As a firm believer in the healing and transformative power of the arts, Novak has helped raise awareness of artistic expression as a coping aid for people dealing with physical or mental illness, emotional trauma, or other challenges. Dr. Louis Zona, the museum's director, said Novak's life-affirming pastels "are a reminder that art in its many forms exists to raise our spirits and inspire us to see beauty throughout God's universe."

In her own life, Novak is no stranger to life's ups and downs. She has struggled with bipolar disorder, survived breast cancer, and suffered devastating loss when her home was destroyed by fire 14 years ago. Through it all, her painting was an important part of her recovery. "Art is such a healing, wonderful thing," she says. "Even when life has me in the grips of depression, I'm still inspired to paint."



Clockwise from left:

Zona presented Novak with a framed print of the 1872 Winslow Homer painting, *Snap the Whip*, held in the museum's collection.

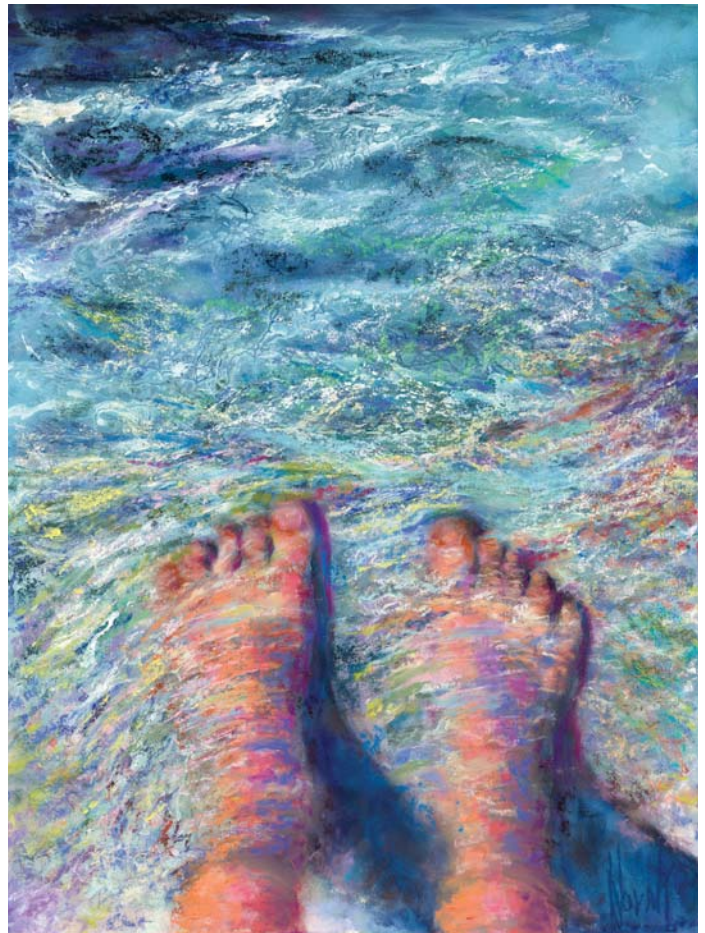
Novak's mentors, master pastelists Harley Brown and Richard McKinley, attended the exhibition opening at The Butler. Novak is pictured here with Brown (far left) and McKinley (far right) and Zona. Her painting of Nelson Mandela, which hangs behind them, is now part of the museum's permanent collection.

Novak spends a moment in quiet reflection in the museum's Giffuni Gallery, where her body of work in pastel was on view.



"I hadn't intended to go into show business," she says. "I had intended to become an artist." But, even as her career as an actress flourished, Novak continued to work on her art when she could. "I needed it," she says. "The film business didn't come easily for me, and I found I needed to paint." Novak learned that her artistic abilities were useful as a way to explore and develop the characters she was portraying on screen. "I'd make sketches on the back of my script, or sometimes I'd work it out on canvas," she says. "It helped me get inside a character's head to figure out how to interpret her."

And then there were the restorative benefits of painting. Making art helped Novak vent some of the inevitable frustration and emotional strain that seems to go hand in hand with movie-making. Although both acting and painting fed her creatively, she found it difficult, as an actor, not to have control over the vision. "You're often not in agreement with the interpretation that you're given by a director," she says. "And that's the thing I love so much about the visual arts—it's your personal interpretation." Having her own creative outlet made it possible for Novak to go on a film set during the day and express the vision of the director, and then, when she



got home, work out her own feelings at her easel. “That was important to me,” she says. “I needed to be able to express things my way.”

### Putting It in Writing

Not only does Novak enjoy an active visual imagination, she also finds pleasure in writing poetry. Sometimes her poems come first and inspire a painting; other times, it’s a painting that inspires a poem, giving voice to the people she portrays. The artist remembers, as a child, sketching at the train station while she waited for her father, who worked as a railroad freight dispatcher. “I loved to sketch the people sitting at the station,” she says. “I’ve always been fascinated with faces and what’s going on in a person’s mind.”

By writing a poem to accompany a painting, Novak is able to convey what she imagines her subjects are thinking. Her painting, *Mountain Man* (on page 59), for example, inspired her to write the following:

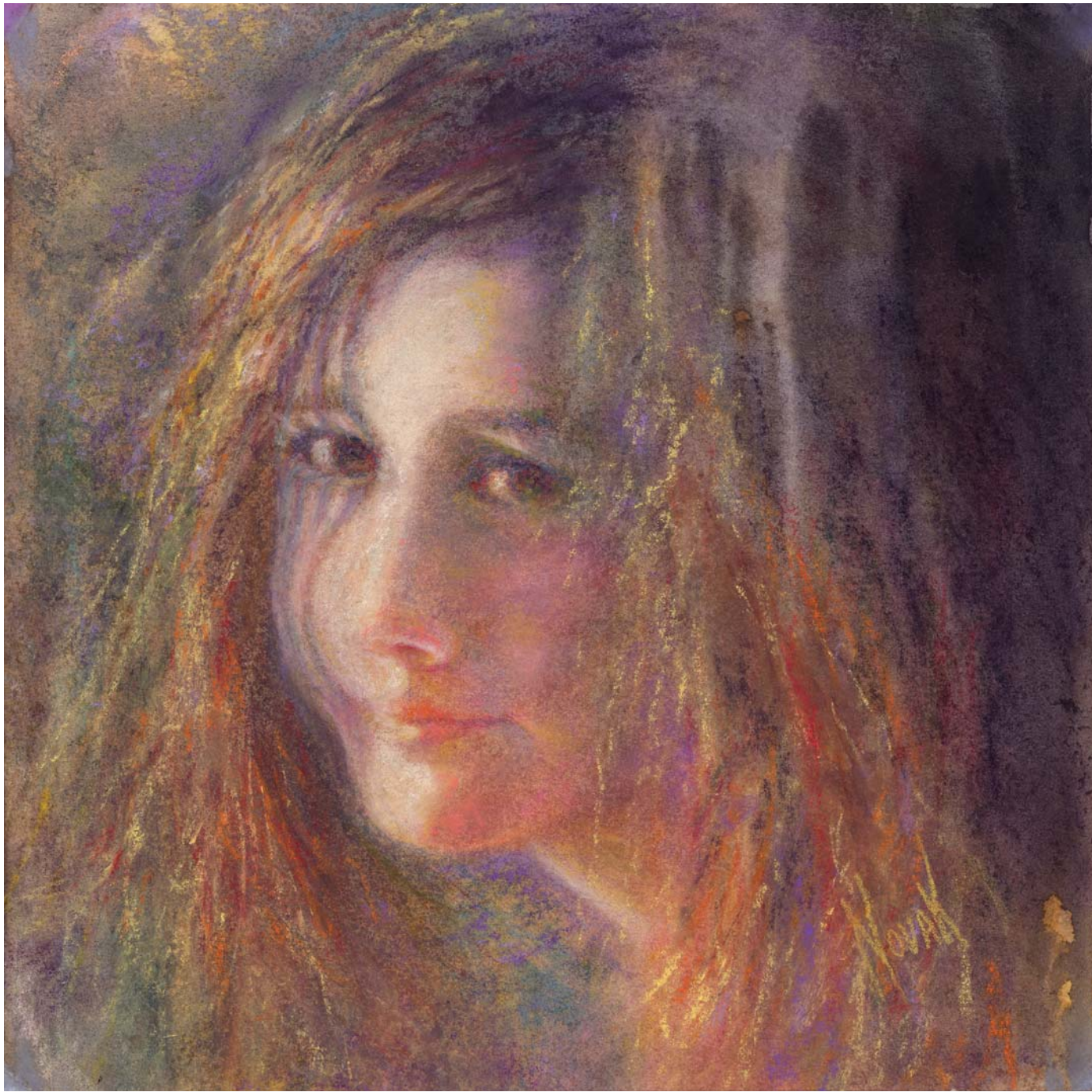
*He spends his time, his mountain time  
No clocks, just life in slow motion;  
He thirsts for the stream that follows his dream,  
To find time to explore the great ocean.*

The artist—who lives with her husband, Robert (Bob) Malloy, on a quiet ranch in beautiful southern Oregon—has configured her studio to suit her various creative pursuits. One side is outfitted for writing and the other for painting. “On the painting side, I can open the windows and doors, so I can step outside,” she explains. “But if a thought comes into my mind that I just have to get down, I can go over to the writing side and use the computer.”



In her career as a film actress in the 1950s and '60s, **Kim Novak** ([www.kimnovakartist.com](http://www.kimnovakartist.com)) starred in such highly praised films as *Picnic* with William Holden, *The Man With the Golden Arm* with Frank Sinatra and *Vertigo* with Jimmy Stewart. In 2003, she was presented with the Eastman Kodak Archives Award for her contribution to film, joining a list of recipients that includes Greta Garbo, Audrey Hepburn, Martin Scorsese and Meryl Streep. Novak chose to leave the film industry at the height of her career and relocated to Big Sur, Calif., where she

focused her creative inclinations on painting and writing poetry. She has studied painting with pastel masters Harley Brown and Richard McKinley, whom she considers important mentors. Novak currently lives on a ranch in southern Oregon with her husband, equine veterinarian Robert Malloy.



Like most artists, Novak wishes her studio were bigger. “Bob has already removed some doors for me,” she says, “but I can’t go any further or I’d go into the dog run.” Still, it’s a creative haven for the artist, keeping her within reach of her beloved animals and the world of nature.

### Letting It Happen

Novak remembers experimenting with pastels in her classes at the Art Institute, but she really came to appreciate the special qualities of the medium when she started working with artist Richard McKinley, who—along with artist

Harley Brown—has been an important mentor. “What intrigued me,” she says, “was Richard’s use of the watercolor underpainting. I love pastel, and I love watercolor, and putting the two together is the most incredible combination.”

Much of Novak’s imagery grows out of her imagination, and many times the key to unlocking inspiration is simply to begin with an underpainting and see where it leads. Of her pastel, *Looking Back to See Ahead* (above), which began with a watercolor underpainting, the artist explains: “The underpainting first led me to a waterfall, which you can still

**Looking Back to See Ahead** (12x12)

**River Dancers** (opposite; 12x16)



## “My only limitations are the boundaries of my imagination.”

see, especially on the upper-right side; then the water parted, and it led me to her—a lovely young girl looking back at me.” Once she had the image in mind, Novak found a reference photo that aligned with her vision. “I just happened to find a photo in my files with the head at the right angle and the lighting that I was after, so I could get the dramatic shadow effect on that eye, which I really liked.”

McKinley also introduced Novak to pastel grounds, which provide a textural quality that offers yet another avenue for an improvisational response. “Sometimes the resulting texture will give me an idea for what I want to paint,” she says. “It’s almost like I can see things in the texture. For a lot of paintings, I’ll have an idea, make a sketch and go from there. For others, I just want to let them happen.”

Novak finds that a concept usually does spring forth out of this spontaneous approach, but if it doesn’t, she’s content to set the work aside temporarily. “I may not quite see where a piece is going, but I know that it may be that

I just don’t see it yet.” The artist also will turn a piece sideways or upside down to unleash an image. “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” she says.

### Digging Deeper

Regardless of the subject, Novak’s work is steeped in emotion, symbolic imagery and storytelling—but not in a straightforward way. “I feel that things should be left to be discovered by the viewer,” she says. “I never like everything to be handed out; I want to dig for it. I think it’s more fun, as a viewer, if you have to work at it.”

Although Novak’s creative impulse has taken her in a number of directions, she’s particularly grateful for the many ways in which the visual arts have enriched her life. “There’s so much of life that still touches me profoundly,” she says, “and if I can touch someone else along the way, in my own way, I can’t imagine any better reward.” ■

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ANNE HEVENER, the editor-in-chief of *Pastel Journal*, has been writing about art and artists for many years.