

# ALEXANDRE

## Where the Image Dissolves

By Annabel Keenan

In the paintings of Maine-based artist Tessa Greene O'Brien, the surface is never merely a support. It is a site of memory, labor, and material history—dyed, bleached, sewn, and sometimes frayed. Color spreads through the canvas like weather through cloth, producing fields that appear sun-faded or worn, as though the image had been steeped in light and time. Figures and trees emerge slowly from these fields, sometimes rendered with specificity, sometimes dissolving into the fabric that holds them. O'Brien's paintings hover in the territory between picture and material, between the remembered world and the tactile evidence of paint and cloth.

O'Brien begins with rolls of canvas and found textiles, dyeing them in batches, in a way giving herself a color-field painting as a support. Scraps are reused for reasons of sustainability and for the histories they carry. O'Brien sews these pieces together, embracing the visible seams and creating a kind of imperfect grid as the painting begins to form an identity, seen clearly in *Izzy in the Field*. She embraces edges, allowing the results of her rough sewing to become a tactile part of the composition. After stretching the sewn canvas, she sketches with bleach, creating light as colors drift, forming atmospheric grounds from which fragments of landscape or human presence gradually materialize.

The process continues as O'Brien unstretches the work, washes and dries the canvas and then stretches it again before painting hot wax on the surface. She might stain the support further and add liquid acrylic before ironing off the wax and sealing the surface, capturing an image that is both fixed and dissolved, like a ghostly apparition. The resulting compositions are dynamic in their juxtaposition of soft washes of color and crisp, thick hues, like the heavy marks scattered across *Allen Island Salt Pond* or the dashes of vibrant yellow and green in *August Garden, Montpelier*.

O'Brien's process situates her within a lineage of experimental painters from the twentieth century. She cites the influence of artists associated with the Supports/Surfaces movement, whose members dismantled painting into its basic components—cloth, stretcher, pigment—in order to examine the medium's structural conditions. Figures such as Claude Viallat and Louis Cane treated the canvas not simply as a neutral ground but as an object whose physical qualities could become the subject of the work. O'Brien inherits this attention to material while redirecting it toward a more intimate register. Her gestures insist that the viewer recognize the painting not only as an image but also as fabric—something that has been dyed, handled, and stitched.

Yet the historical lineage does not stop with Supports/Surfaces. One can also sense the atmospheric colors of Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, or even an earthy, restrained Joan Mitchell. Like Frankenthaler, O'Brien allows color to soak into the canvas, dissolving the boundaries between ground and image. Like the great Sam Gilliam, she treats cloth as a flexible medium capable of bearing the marks of gravity, dye, and process. But whereas those painters pushed toward abstraction, O'Brien repeatedly pulls the viewer back into the world around us—toward specific landscapes, bodies, and remembered moments.

Indeed, the oscillation between abstraction and representation is central to her work. The paintings often originate in family photographs, as well as her own observations formed from a life spent uniquely attuned to the natural world. Yet O'Brien doesn't reproduce these images with documentary fidelity. Instead, she reconstructs them through the haze of recollection, embracing chance and ambiguity. Some passages are rendered with crisp clarity, like the charming hockey scene in *Skate Gods, Mill Creek* and the figure strolling through a wintry night in *Ferry Village Ball Field*. Elsewhere the image loosens, dissolving into pools of color or open passages of stained cloth. In *Allen Island*, a dark, foggy landscape seems to be melting in yellow light, a shifting field in which imagery appears and disappears, as though memory itself were fluctuating between focus and blur.

In some works, the artist sews fragments of domestic textiles like linen table runners, curtains, or pillowcases directly into the composition. A weathered life preserver becomes part of the surface of *Elm Tree at Night*, a stunning red piece that illustrates O'Brien's ability to create depth, atmosphere, and texture through subtle shifts in tone and the many steps in her process. The fabrics resemble the durable goods that populate everyday life in coastal Maine—tote bags, sailcloth, outdoor gear, tents faded by salt and sun. Their presence challenges the distinction between painting and object, inviting the viewer to imagine the domestic or maritime contexts from which these materials emerged.

O'Brien's paintings revolve around a cluster of interrelated concerns: love, perception, and place. Landscapes occupy a central role. The artist speaks of walking through the countryside aware of property lines and "no trespassing" signs, hearing the gossip and feuds that define local territories. Land holds personal meaning for O'Brien, whose mom passed away when the artist was only seven. Growing up on 75 acres of land, O'Brien spent hours outside, roaming the forests. As she's gotten older, she's come to view a connection between the memory of her mom and the land, understanding the uncanny ways in which something as simple as a glimpse of a pond can spark a memory.

Beyond the land itself, environmental phenomena haunt the landscapes O'Brien depicts. Orange sunsets and red skies like the one seen in *Elm Tree at Night* may be the consequence of distant forest fires; purple skies may result from industrial pollution drifting across regions. Beauty and disturbance coexist in the same atmosphere. Indeed, O'Brien paints with clear awareness and appreciation of the natural world. She captures delicate flora in *Addison Goldenrod*, the diverse hues of the landscape in *Allen Island Salt Pond*, and the awe-inspiring scale of the trees in *Bretton Woods Ski*, the old forest standing tall for generations. An ecofeminist at heart ("I have no choice, it's a social responsibility ingrained in me," she said), O'Brien doesn't view a hierarchy of man and nature.

Living and working in New England and in a state that borders Canada, it's hard not to think of artists like Emily Carr when looking at O'Brien's work. Indeed, beyond their shared affinity towards depicting and living closely with nature is a clear environmentalist ethos, with Carr raising alarms about the impact of industrial logging in the early 20th century. At times, O'Brien's work seems to transport the viewer deep into the Boreal Forest and the Canadian landscapes of Tom Thomson and J.E.H. MacDonald. But while these artists painted with a sense of urgency, as if desperate to capture the beauty and immensity of the forest, O'Brien slows the process, combining swift observations with softer reflections less grounded in the physical world.

The recent appearance of the figure in O'Brien's work marks a subtle but significant shift. Earlier paintings often depicted landscapes devoid of human presence. In newer canvases, bodies enter the scene: a person standing beneath a tree, a figure moving through tall grass, silhouettes gathered in a clearing. Yet these figures remain intentionally open-ended. Their identities are not fully specified; faces may be indistinct; gestures suggestive rather than descriptive. With this ambiguity, O'Brien allows the viewer to project themselves or their own experiences into the space of the painting.

This decision to add figures emerged partly from the circumstances surrounding the creation of the series. As O'Brien began working on these pieces, political and social tensions intruded upon daily life: immigration raids reached even the small communities of Maine; crises unfolded across the country; the artist found herself repeatedly pulled away from the studio to care for neighbors and aging parents. In this context, the artist shared, the appearance of the body in her paintings took on new resonance as a different means to explore love in its many forms, including grief, desire, awe, loss, and contentment.

What distinguishes O'Brien's work is its ability to hold together seemingly divergent traditions. Modernist inquiries into the material conditions of painting

coexist with the intimate histories of domestic textile craft. Personal memory intersects with ecological awareness. Representation flickers in and out of abstraction. The canvas is at once image and object, landscape and fabric.

Standing before one of these paintings, the viewer becomes aware of time layered on the surface. There is the immediate time of the gesture—the swift marks that establish a figure or horizon line. There is the slower time of dye soaking into cloth, of seams stitched by hand. And there is the deeper temporal horizon of memory itself.

In this sense O'Brien's paintings might be understood as acts of attentive care. They ask the viewer to notice the small joys embedded in ordinary surroundings—light hitting a clearing in the woods, the color of evening sky, the presence of another body in the landscape. But they also acknowledge the complexities that inhabit any place: legacies of ownership and trespass, environmental disturbance, the ghosts of past lives. The paintings do not resolve these tensions; instead they allow them to remain visible within the weave of cloth and pigment. O'Brien's paintings are at once grounded and ephemeral—objects whose frayed seams and faded colors carry the quiet insistence that every surface, like every landscape, is composed of intertwined histories.