

DREAMS INTO PAINTINGS

The multiple media art of Helen Stanley.

By Nancy Ellis

Helen Stanley is a classic storyteller.

As an artist, her work in multiple media contains movement, mystery and suspense; as a wife and mother, she basks in the vital role of nurturer, and as a teacher she stretches her own horizons while imparting wisdom gained from a lifetime of pursuing her art.

Stanley records her "stories"—visual experiences that come to her, often in the form of dreams and daydreams—in a journal, which then becomes the sketchbook from which she distills dreams into paintings. She is dedicated as an artist, working up to 40 hours a week in her studio, but she also en-

joys teaching, privately and at nearby colleges: "Painting is so egocentric, so solitary, it's nice to get outside yourself," she says of her passion for passing it on.

Helen Stanley grew up in Farmington, New Mexico, but for the past 20 years, has lived in San Rafael, California, just across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. Married to sculptor Rodger Jacobsen, whom she met while a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, the couple lives with their 17-year-old son on a wooded acre of land in Marin County. Here Stanley enjoys the luxury of spontaneous walks through dense woods all the way to the sea. She is usually

accompanied by her dog and often laden with enough art supplies to complete small paintings on location.

Despite avant-garde training in abstract expressionism at the Art Institute in San Francisco ("I drove out there from Farmington with my older brother in a pickup truck," she recalls, laughing at her own fresh-out-of-high-school naivete) and a degree in printmaking, Stanley found herself with a strong desire to return to drawing.

"In those days, I painted heavy, dark, thick canvases, but I never did feel like that 'macho' paint was me. After I left the Institute, I took two years off from my art to study seriously



"The Vapor Trail," 1989, 3-D bowl and ax tip, remainder of ax is painted, bisque stain, 23" diameter



"Checked Bowl," 1988, oil paint on gessoed, heavy watercolor paper, 22" x 40"

with a fine chef.

"Cooking, I found, has absolutes; you put many hours of effort into a work that is consumed in minutes. It teaches you to 'let go,'" Stanley says, adding that she found a definite and valuable connection between this and her painting.

Although Stanley's enjoyment of cooking continues—"I like the nurturing aspects of it"—she resumed painting after the birth of her son Jessie, self-nicknamed "Zero."

The household at that time also included two stepdaughters, Zoe now 24 and Kelcey now 28.

"When I started painting again, I did a lot of watercolor for the next 10 years. I could do small pieces, and because it was non-toxic, I didn't have to worry about leaving it out. Watercolor works in well with the interruptions typical of child-rearing, since you can put down a wash and then come back to it later. My work then was very accurate and realistic, and included a lot of still lifes."

Today Stanley still loves to draw, and her work remains, in many ways, accurate and realistic. But it has evolved, and the influence of her early days in New Mexico has emerged as a dominant theme. "Despite all these years in Marin County, I'm still a New Mexico girl," she says, laughing.

From early childhood, when her interest in art became obvious, Stanley enjoyed the complete support and encouragement of her parents. Her father, a petroleum geologist, and her mother, a school teacher, met in



Socorro, New Mexico and later moved to Farmington.

Stanley recalls her own fascination with the rich material culture of the prehistoric Anasazi, as well as the modern Navajo, Apache and Ute, that was so abundant around Farmington, located in the Four Corners region. "You couldn't walk across the football field at Farmington High without picking up big chunks of prehistoric pot shards.

"I have an emotional relationship with American Indians, rather than a logical or historical one. This has helped to open my eyes to the cultures of the world and the objects people make, both practical and spiritual, and has given me confidence to explore my own archetypal artistic expressions."

A strong theme in Stanley's current work is her interest in vessels or container-like objects that she often cuts out into free-form shapes, adding a third dimension, or at least the illusion of one. Sometimes the vessel is literal, such as a detailed oil painting of an Anasazi bowl tilted toward the viewer with a ladder extending up from the base. But other times it is implied, such as a richly rendered pastel of a shaft of light illuminating a portion of space contained within a kiva.

Stanley also admits to the influence of living half her lifetime with a sculptor (Rodger Jacobsen is a welder who works primarily in steel), and much of her own art is concerned with shape and volume. "The way light falls on an object gives one an understanding of volume," she says.

And within that space, lie the drama and mystery—i.e. the story, which Stanley starts and the viewer must finish. "Like many visual artists, I find it difficult to explain what and why I paint. It's a mystery to me, and I do not really want to disturb it, just to let it be as intuitive and expressive as possible."

Like all good mysteries, one cannot help but be drawn into the story of a Stanley painting.

Works by Helen Stanley may be seen at Glenn Green Galleries, 50 East San Francisco Street. Hours: 9:30-5:00 Monday-Saturday. (505) 988-4168. In Arizona, Glenn Green Galleries are located at the Phoenician Resort, 6000 East Camelback Road, Scottsdale. (602) 990-9110.