

# susan swartz

## seasons of the soul

June 17–October 2, 2011

Raphael Fitzgerald



Susan Swartz inherited her creative gene from a family of artists and musicians and has been painting for more than forty years. Since 1998, Swartz has devoted herself to painting full-time in Park City, Utah, and Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

Inspired by the natural world and the intersection of spirituality and art, Swartz paints profoundly abstract landscapes and nature scenes. Her distinctive style and artistic excellence have earned her international recognition, and her works are featured in numerous collections, including the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland; the George Eccles 2002 Olympic Winter Games Museum and Springville Museum of Art in Utah; and the U.S. Ski Hall of Fame and Museum in Ishpeming, Michigan. This summer NMWA features thirteen of Swartz's vibrant canvases. Curator Raphael Fitzgerald asked Swartz to talk about her creative process.

**RF: How and when did you discover that you had a talent for painting?** SS: When I was a senior in high school, my art teacher told my parents he thought I had talent, which encouraged me to seek out art programs for college; I haven't stopped painting since. My dad's sister was a talented realist painter. I admire her water scenes and portraits, and she served as an inspiration to me throughout college and in my early years as a professional. Also,

Left: Susan Swartz, *Fading Light*, 2010; Acrylic on linen; 36 x 48 in., Private Collection; Opposite right: Susan Swartz, *Forest Glow*, 2007; Acrylic on linen; 48 x 72 in., Private Collection; Opposite far right: Susan Swartz, *Iridescent Reflections*, 2005; Acrylic on linen; 48 x 60 in., Private Collection

my nephew is an accomplished artist and is on the faculty of Denison University. I studied at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania.

**RF: How would you describe your style and process?** SS: I'm in an impressionist/expressionist stage now. Unlike traditional impressionists, I primarily work with a palette knife and large brushes for the glazes. I work in an indoor studio. My approach has evolved in large part due to my illnesses and spiritual experiences. Instead of painting from an image, I paint from my soul. There is so much self-doubt for me during the process. I often think, "This isn't right, I can't do this." Then, just when I'm feeling a crisis of confidence, the missing element falls into place and the whole piece becomes right. Then I can sit back and say, "I did it, it's done." That's my favorite part of the process.

**RF: Why is nature your primary subject?** SS: Earlier in my career, I had several stages—portraits, barns, small animals, underwater scenes, and flowers. Then I moved west to big sky country. While skiing one day, I saw a fresh carpet of snow that had blanketed the ground and the world dazzled with vitality. I thought, "How could I try to paint anything other than what

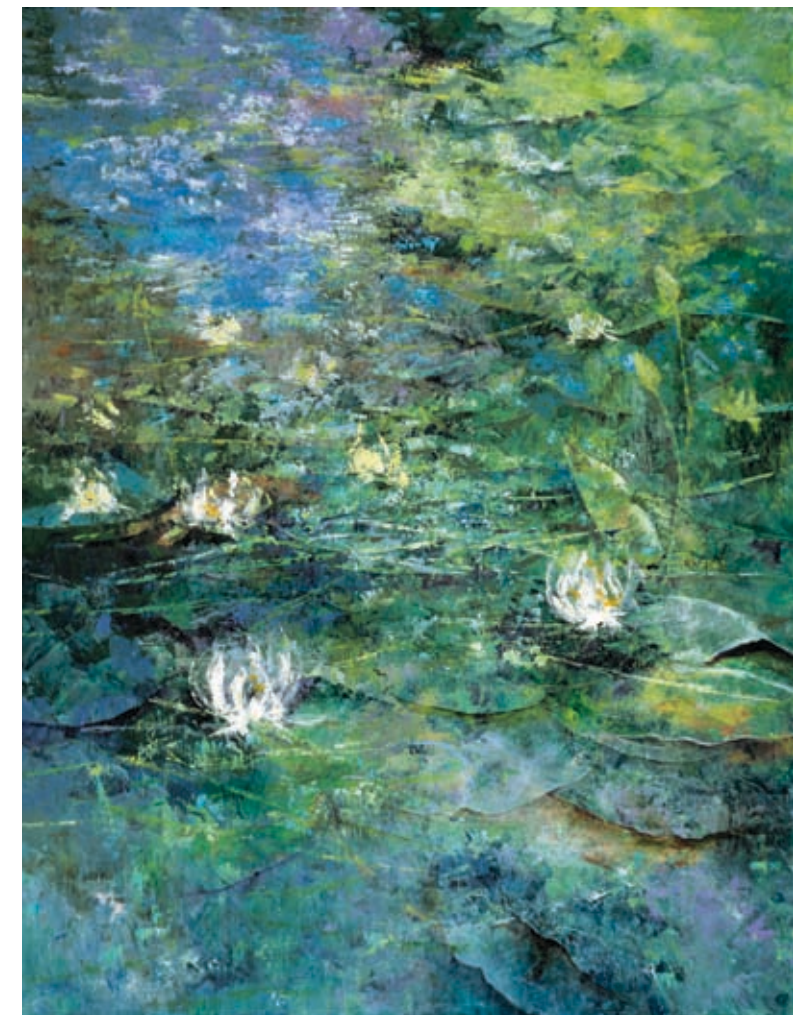


God has created?" If I can make people pause and *see* what is real during this busy age when we all hurry through our lives, if I could make people see the unsentimental beauty of nature for one moment, then I will have met my goal. Nature is what sustains us. We seem to have forgotten this truth.

I approach my paintings with an underwritten narrative: a plea to notice, respect, and preserve the environment. Mankind's carelessness with the natural world has had a very personal effect on my health. I paint now from a place of spiritual reverence for nature and a determination to see it cleaned and protected.

**RF: Can you tell me about the sources of inspiration and personal events that motivate you? What do you want visitors to experience when viewing your works?** SS: The changing seasons—it's hard to beat the resplendence of autumn in the mountains, but the starkness of winter has its own austere beauty. I love what poet Emily Dickinson writes about spring, that it is the answer to Nicodemus's question about rebirth. Summer brings happy memories of spending time on the coast with my family.

On a more personal level, about a decade ago, I was diagnosed with mercury poisoning, most likely from eating fish from



contaminated waters. Six years later, I became critically ill with another environmentally bred illness: Lyme disease. Although my health wreaked tremendous havoc on my body and spirit, it also shook me out of my comfort level as an artist. The art I am now creating is more impassioned, more profound, more achingly full of desire than anything I have created in the past. I hope viewers take pause from their busy lives and appreciate the beauty of our world, spurring them into serving as stewards of the environment.

**RF: You and your husband are founding members of Impact Partners and have helped produce films about environmental and social concerns. Can you tell me about the films?**

**SS:** I see myself as both an artist and an activist. Film and painting are just different mediums to convey the same message. We became involved with Impact Partners to support documentary filmmakers who shed light on injustice, particularly environmental injustice. *Under Our Skin* is a powerful documentary about Lyme disease. With *The Cove*, which won an Academy Award, we

Susan Swartz, *Autumn Song*, 2009; Acrylic on linen; 20 x 20 in.; Private Collection

were executive producers of the companion film narrated by Robert Kennedy, Jr.; it examines the dangers of mercury poisoning on the global environment. Impact Partners had three films premier at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival:

**!Women Art Revolution**, directed by Lynn Hershman Leason, is a groundbreaking documentary that investigates the evolution of the feminist art movement in America.

Tiffany Shlain's **Connected: An Autobiography about Love, Death, and Technology** explores the connections linking the environment, consumption, population growth, technology, human rights, and the global economy.

In **Miss Representation**, director Jennifer Siebel Newsom combines stories from teenage girls and interviews with Katie Couric, Condoleezza Rice, and Gloria Steinem about how the media objectifies women.

*Raphael Fitzgerald* is exhibitions coordinator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

*Susan Swartz: Seasons of the Soul* is organized by the National Museum of Women in the Arts and is generously supported by the Members of NMWA.



### Linking Environment, Healing, and Creativity: A Series of Films in Conjunction with *Seasons of the Soul*

#### The Science of Healing with Dr. Esther Sternberg

Introduced by Dr. Esther Sternberg, physician, neuroscientist, author, and television host  
Monday, June 20 at 7 p.m.

#### A Healthy Baby Girl

Introduced by Judith Helfand, award-winning filmmaker, activist, and educator  
Tuesday, July 19 at 7 p.m.

#### The Last Mountain

Introduced by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., President of Waterkeeper Alliance  
Monday, September 12 at 7 p.m.

#### No Impact Man

Introduced by Eden Wurmfeld, award-winning producer of features and documentaries  
Sunday, October 2 at 2 p.m.