

Pursuing the Universal Language

Art, Dance, Life – Connecting with Westport Artist Janet Slom
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If you want to talk Art with Janet Slom, be prepared for some detours through dance, meditation, the nature of collaboration, yoga and the human condition. A renowned artist and teacher who has shown her transcendental abstract paintings on several continents, Janet paints not from her imagination so much as from her soul. Which is not surprising when you learn that Janet the artist has her roots in Janet the dancer and Janet the student of yoga and meditation. Today those seemingly disparate threads have been woven together in her life and her art. "Everything influences everything else," she says, sipping tea in her art-filled living room. "Everything feeds everything else."

She grew up on a flower farm outside Johannesburg, South Africa, and this was no ordinary flower farm. Janet's father, the son of Russian émigrés, was a spiritual seeker who left home at age sixteen to study Eastern philosophies. He found his way to Shambhala, a Tibetan philosophy that believes in the common goodness of mankind. He returned to South Africa, bought a magnificent piece of farmland with ancient trees and a river. Beyond its commercial functions, it served as the base of a spiritual community. The flowers are what Janet

remembers most vividly. "Magnificent reds and yellow, vibrant oranges – it was like living in a painting," she recalls.

On weekends, Janet's father would dispatch buses into townships and bring people back to the farm to discuss their spiritual beliefs. Sometimes gurus from India would come and teach. It was a place free of judgment and segregation, Janet says, and it's where she became steeped in the traditions of yoga, meditation and honoring the sacred. It never dawned on her that her father was breaking fundamental rules of apartheid.



At a young age, Janet realized she had a talent for both art and dance. While she would always paint, from age five to seventeen she danced competitively and earned a reputation. Ballet demands an incredible self-discipline that Janet says has stayed with her, her whole life; it was very hard on her body, and at age seventeen she gave it up. Yet she still felt the urgency to express herself creatively. That creativity wouldn't be about performance anymore, rather she felt she could make the materials dance.

In fact, Janet has always had a strong interest in materials: pigments, oils, drawing pencils, encaustic, sand, marble dust... "They're part of a universal language," she says. "Working in different materials feels like I'm having a conversation with the process. If you can make the materials speak, or sing, or dance, or whatever the expression is, that's important. I never ask why. I'm the facilitator and it comes through me. The me disappears and the process takes over and at the end of it, something is born. I never know how it's going to turn out. It's very intuitive, I just follow the thread."

She may not know how a piece will end, but she always knows how it begins: with a meditation. When she feels ready, she starts by making a mark on the canvas. "I lose myself in the piece," Janet explains. "As I

work, I lay the canvas flat on the floor, then put it up on the wall, or maybe I'll sit with it. Really, physically, it is a dance."

Lately, Janet's work has begun to change on a profound level. She's in the middle of a life change, leaving her past behind and starting anew. Not surprisingly, her art is reflecting this transformation, which she likens to "living in the blankness of a canvas." Petite and impassioned, when Janet speaks, she sounds like she's reading. But because her inner and outer worlds are so aligned, the words come out perfectly crafted, like her soul has been rehearsing them forever.



She has done commissioned work in the past – most notably an oversized mixed-media piece for a United Nations delegation, with a theme of 'Rebuilding Torn Societies.' Individuals and institutions have started commissioning work, which she says is a completely different way to paint. "Before working on a piece, I visit the person and place to get to know them on a deeper level, and this allows the painting to unfold in a way that honors the place it will hold, and the people it's being done for." She takes in the subject and environment on an emotional and spiritual level – his or her passions, interests and taste – and lets that inform her own unique artistic sensibility. This process between artist and subject is a dance that reveals an abstract 'portrait' that has a living presence. People who have commissioned work by Janet fall in love with it because it captures and embraces who they are.

Janet sums up her philosophy, "We live in a society that doesn't always permit us to be vulnerable," she says, "a society that's competitive, and we're often programmed to not feel good about ourselves. I want to live my truth, and in doing so, inspire others to do the same. This is my path: sharing the human condition. Everybody has their story. I feel it is important and precious for each of us to share our unique stories."