



# Visual Narratives of Ethereal Beauty

By creating strata with mixed media, wax and pastel, California artist **Mira M. White** makes images with ephemeral qualities of transcendence and transformation.

BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN

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*Everything and Nothing*  
(mixed media, 36x48)



Recent mixed-media works by Mira M. White accomplish a heroic feat by expressing intangible ideas using only essential cues. They're vigorous, engaging and contemplative, not unlike visual koans, the paradoxes used in Buddhism to show the limits of logical thinking, or Japanese haikus, imparting enigmatic, concise narratives. They're simultaneously pensive and compelling; universal yet highly personal in message; artworks of poetic power, masterfully made with the stuff of playful insight, self-awareness and keen perception.

## Discovery and Transformation

Although White has created landscapes and other representational subject matter, the majority of her work has more recently evolved from a subject-driven to a process-driven art form. Nowadays, White loves the excitement and sheer adventure of discovering things—paint qualities, forms, themes, concepts—while she's working. She's keenly interested in seeing what combinations of materials can do. "Even as a child, I felt that there was always something of an essence to be discovered," she says.

Impressive in the evolution of White's work is the emergence of a personal iconography of context—narratives revealed in symbols, signs, words, figures and patterns—all derived organically during her creative process. Since White prefers the adventure of revelation and discovery while working, she doesn't like things to be preplanned or predetermined. "I've developed an iconography that truly resonates with me," White says. "My current work explores color, form and line in an abstract manner, although I structure narratives into them as I develop imagery. During my painting process, narratives form in my mind through associations of images within my paintings. It's an essential part of my process, and often I'll use the title of a painting to describe my creative journey during the making of it."



Discovery, realization, spiritual growth and transformation are germane to her art. Creating, for White, is a process that forges events and observations of the world around her into greater mindfulness and inner growth. "This lifelong quest in art," she says, "is my yoga."

## A Vital Component

An essential element in White's mixed-media work is the inclusion of soft pastel. Sometimes she crushes pieces of pastel into bits, which she calls "little jewels," and applies the pulverized color with her fingers, a soft tissue or a sponge to create a delicate pastel glaze. She also uses very soft pastel, preferring Schmincke and Great American Artworks, for direct mark-making, often in a limited, specifically targeted palette. White uses Colour Shapers to push pastel around the varied surfaces and, at times, brushes alcohol on top of the medium, converting it into a wet paint medium.

Preserving the integrity of the pastel quality when used in these complex strata of diverse

media, including wax, is paramount to the success of White's mixed-media work. It requires a fixative that seals both dry pastel and graphite marks and images between paint layers. For this important task, she has come to rely on a fixative that she has used on her pastel paintings for more than 30 years. Consisting of a 1:1 mixture of fat-free milk and 70-percent isopropyl rubbing alcohol, the artist applies it with a Preval aerosol-based sprayer, which is commonly available in hardware stores. She explains, "The alcohol evaporates, leaving the casein of the milk to affix the particles permanently. So, whether working on paper, canvas or panel, there's no need to use glass to protect my work."

## Waxing Poetic

In recent years, White has added to her repertoire of media both encaustic, which is heated beeswax, and cold wax, which contains mineral spirits and can be mixed with oil paints to add body. She learned to use wax through trial and error, fearless exploration, and continual experimentation.

**Upside Downside (Being Here Is Wondrous)** (above; mixed media, 36x48)

**Enigma (Stage 1)** (opposite top; mixed media, 24x18)

**Enigma (Stage 2)** (opposite bottom; mixed media, 24x18)





*Her Name Is  
Sophia & She  
Wears a Dress of  
Stars* (pastel and  
acrylic, 43x31)

*A Quiet Dream*  
(opposite; mixed  
media, 22x30)

The artist now finds that it unifies her work, both tying together and enhancing the many diverse media. It adds a beautiful translucent quality, as well as texture, to her work. Its physical attributes include adding body to paint applications and a receptivity to scraping, carving or scratching that reveals underlayers. In many ways, the addition of wax lends a physicality and presence to the artwork. Yet, simultaneously, it imparts exquisitely mysterious and poetic qualities.

Comparing the earlier and finished stages of White's painting, *Enigma* (on page xx),

demonstrates how her wax and mixed-media constructive process profoundly influences the completion of a painting. In *Enigma* (Stage 1) (on page xx), we see oil, graphite powder and cold wax. Then, White added layers of oil paint, pigment sticks and cold wax, mixed with pulverized soft pastel, and the painting progressed to its dynamic, final appearance in *Enigma*.

White often uses writing in her work. As much for a form of mark-making as for its message, it remains integral to the artist's process. Exemplified in *Upside Downside* (*Being Here*

*Is Wondrous*) (on page xx), the artist notes, "Sometimes marks become words. I don't care if anyone can read the writing. It's simply a graphic texture for me. The script and other parts in this painting are done with soft pastel applied to oil paint, cold wax and pigment sticks. I mix cold wax into the oil paint to give it more body and use it sparingly, so it can dry thoroughly. If applied too thickly, the surface dries but not the interior."

Another form of graphic mark-making that the artist wields with innovative, sometimes fanciful, qualities is the clustering of imaginary star constellations. They appear in her enigmatic pastel, *Her Name Is Sophia & She Wears a Dress of Stars* (opposite). Again, these constellations figure into her mixed-media painting created with acrylic sprays and pastel, *A Quiet Dream* (below). This piece also marks the inaugural appearance of a rainbow into White's visual vocabulary, a symbol that's often repeated afterward. She eloquently describes

this painting's imagery as "a rainbow rising out of the cathedral of the head."

## Working in Series

A painting that White considers one of her major works is her "Everything and Nothing" series (on pages xx-xx). It evolved from an earlier painting that had a lot of bright red color. After it hung on her wall for some time, White decided to make it more subtle in color and "benign" in nature. She rubbed pastel into multiple applications of cold wax and pigment sticks to achieve a gentle glow. Stenciled with powdered pastel, multiples of "0" and "1" float across the surface, some emerging freely, others appearing beneath or enmeshed in an undulating net. "I use grids frequently and think of them as webs of creation or bindings, as some kind of an inherent structure from which we often try to break free," says White. "The '01' is connected to the title and has a lot to do with my belief that everything is really nothing; all is







**Everything and Nothing Round No. 2** (mixed media, 22x30)

illusion. Like much of my recent art, it's based on my work and experiences as a spiritual student over the last 40 years."

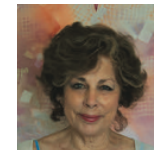
Vibrant and more textural, *Everything and Nothing Round No. 2* (above) received an honorable mention in the 2018 Pastel 100 competition. The series continues her visual exploration of illusion and substance, duality and oneness. White depicts a silhouetted and haloed female figure in *Everything and Nothing No. 3* (opposite). Text, numbers and a prismatic "X" serve to imbue the painting further with expansive and expressive properties. "I just felt like the painting needed a figure, and she emerged silhouetted and somewhat atmospheric. I didn't want to go any further with it or treat it as a portrait," explains White.

Created on hot-pressed 140-lb. Arches watercolor paper and stapled like canvas to stretcher bars, *Everything and Nothing No. 4* (opposite) began as a watercolor in oranges and lavenders. "It looked too sweet," recalls White, so she kept working on it to change the palette. "A modified rainbow appeared in

pastel that some may interpret as a figure," says White. "As I worked, it developed a lively texture. A rough surface is a big deal to me. I like it, and I've got to do it. I have a lot of layers of cold wax and pastel on this piece. When I sprayed it with fixative, I scratched into it while it was still wet."

The texturing of her paintings isn't just a physical expression; White feels it resonates more deeply. "With the addition of wax to my mixed-media work, there's an immediate excitement in layering and obscuring, and then excavating through to the underlayers using scraping and scratching," she says. "When I build up layers, I intuitively know that I have to agitate the surface. Otherwise, it's boring to me. Mark-making with pastel, graphite or oil sticks is very expressive, and scratching and scraping is pretty primal in a way. I guess I just have to make my mark, so to speak." ■

ROBERT K CARSTEN ([robertcarsten.com](http://robertcarsten.com)) is an artist, author and exhibitions juror, and he teaches workshops nationally and abroad.



**Mira M. White** ([miramwhite.com](http://miramwhite.com)) holds an MFA with distinction and a BFA with high distinction from the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she later taught. Her highly experimental work has been widely shown in solo, two-person and group exhibitions, and is in numerous private and public collections. Her art has garnered many awards, including a Grand Prize at the Rocky Mountain National Watermedia Exhibition, and has been featured in several publications. For decades, she has instructed popular workshops and classes around the country and abroad. She'll teach a workshop October 3-5, 2019, entitled "Stunning Abstracts With Soft Pastels," at Dakota Pastels in Mt. Vernon, an hour north of Seattle.



**Everything and Nothing, No. 3** (pastel, 40x30)

**Everything and Nothing, No. 4** (left; mixed media, 24x36)