

A DRAWING IS A PERFORMANCE –  
IT IS ONE TIME THEN & THERE  
OF THE MOMENT  
AS AN ACT OF CREATION IS

– Beatrice Darwin



## DRAW I MUST

Cornelia (Nela) Wattlely was born and raised in New Orleans. Nela's independent spirit led her to settle in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she found a lively artistic community she could belong to and a landscape she fell in love with. She has never given up the ties to her family or denied her Southern heritage. She has remained true to the influence of her parents – a deep-hearted spirituality combined with a love and respect of nature.

Nela's parents would often tell her how she learned to draw before she could talk. Drawing has been a constant in her life. For many years she has kept journals – a mixture of notebooks, sketchbooks and hand-made books. They are kept open in her house, in her purse and in the back seat of her car. They contain her written and drawn observations of nature and humanity, what moves her, haikus, ideas, and notes from classes. Above all a sense of joy and wonder pervades what she is seeing. "Draw, draw, draw I must. / Compelling and honest; / It demands, and I draw." Nela writes.

The journals and the later hand-made books, from which these drawings and watercolors were taken, were made in private, not intended to be shown and quite independent of the abstract creative work she was doing elsewhere. They represent the intersection of experimental approaches to making art. On one hand there is mentor, Ann O'Hanlon's art philosophy, which Nela wholeheartedly adopted, with its permission to allow accidents to happen and accept what happens to be there. On the other hand there is detailed note taking. Nela's keen interest in drawing flowers, connecting back to her

mother's passion for plants and gardening, led her to take classes with noted botanist Gladys L. Smith. The results are drawings that are alive with a magic combination of careful depiction and an unruly wash of color.

Beatrice Darwin was a respected illustrator who also loved keeping journals. She taught Nela to make hand-made books and encouraged her creativity. Around 1994 Nela began to use both sides of her opened sketch books to capture what she saw. The hand-made books with their fine quality watercolor paper and dimension provided an epic wide screen work format. Picking up and opening one of these books is an exciting visual experience, demanding one's entire field of vision. It is the perfect format to capture the power of nature that she feels.

Nela discovered Yosemite soon after arriving in the Bay Area. She has been returning there every year, staying for weeks at a time. The visits provide a deep spiritual connection with nature. She writes that her soul is replenished, the power of nature fills her with ecstasy, and that she is humbled. She experiences joy and solitude and feels gratitude for life. Nela has strong connections to Christianity through her family, but in Yosemite she seems to connect more with an all-embracing spiritual force. She expresses all this in the great Yosemite drawings included in this book. They are soulful works. There is great range of expression from soft atmospheric mists, to the tremendous energy of waterfalls and rivers, to the massive scale of rock formations. In these Yosemite drawings and other landscape works she captures the essence and drama of the place that elude most photographers. Over the years she has returned to the same scene and discovered something different whether it is the light, the elements, the drama or her own state of mind.

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For many years Nela has been painting outdoors with friend and artist Dorothy Porter. They have often been on expeditions together to Yosemite and the California Sierras but mostly they get together weekly to paint outdoors, taking in Northern California beaches or the inland wine country. The outings provide camaraderie and discipline. Part of the challenge is to be at the scene, notwithstanding the weather, to understand the situation and synthesize it down to basic elements. Nela is agile. She is able to rapidly pick and choose what she feels or wants to emphasize. Nature provides the inspiration.

Nela's journals also include figure drawings. There are a few self-portraits either drawn from reflection or imagined. (Nela has mentioned that her work is more exuberant than she herself feels.) In other drawings she captures the youthful feeling of energy and anticipation, such as her Tuolumne Meadows front desk sketch, and her affectionate observations of family groups. Her good-natured humor shows in other drawings too, especially the irrepressible fun of a Martini glass or the drawing of woman attending a spa.

With the work in this book Nela strikes a universal chord where art can appeal to everyone. Going beyond subject matter there is much to notice and appreciate. It is very fresh and immediate. Because it was made with love it is full of joy and, without the intention to sell anything or impress anyone, it is honest. This work, without doubt, is an invitation to SEE.



## AFTERWORD

I had looked at a few of Nela's hand-made books at her exhibitions. They would be casually collected on a pedestal or two and quite easy to overlook. But then I would open up a book and be impressed by how consistently good and exciting the work was. However, when it came time to put together this book, I was amazed at how many journals she had filled over the years. It was a gold mine! It has been a great privilege to make selections and so honor an important part of her life work as an artist.

Jeremy Thornton

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