



CORNELIA WATTLEY

Cornelia (Nela) Wattley was born during the Great Louisiana Flood of 1927 to a well-established family in New Orleans. Nela's father had come from Ohio. He was an Episcopalian priest with his own small parish. Her mother's family was comfortable. French was frequently used as a second language. After two children were born, the family moved to a big house in Metairie.

Nela describes her childhood as being full of freedom and space. Life was "Southern," with a slow and relaxed lifestyle. Her close family provided a loving environment, where family loyalty, being polite, and "pulling your own weight" were important principles. Her *Ti Tante* and grandmother lived next door and so the cousins were constantly in and out of each others' homes.

As Nela grew up she took part in the New Orleans's traditions of debutantes and balls, but her exposure to music was to the symphony rather than jazz. She was well educated and after she received her B.A. in French from Sweet Briar, and a year of graduate study at Tulane, she went to school in France for a year and traveled around Europe.

On her return, Nela worked for a while as a volunteer at the New Orleans Symphony and also as a nurse's aide and a hospital technician. Within a few years, she moved first to Manhattan and later to the Bay Area and became a teacher, working at Berkeley Montessori for seven years.

Awakening

Nela says, "I always knew... I can't explain... but I always knew I was going to be an artist. I did some drawing as a child but I didn't really paint." When she met creative art mentor Ann O'Hanlon in the mid sixties that prescient feeling became a reality. Simply put, a creative explosion took place.

Ann and Dick O'Hanlon were a creative force, fostered by the federal W.P.A. program in the 1930's. Dick O' was a sculptor who taught at University of California,

Berkeley. Ann O', well known in Kentucky as a muralist, was a painter and art teacher at Dominican College, CA. Ann had begun to share her philosophy of creativity independently with a group of beginning and experienced artists. The place was called Sight & Insight (S & I.) Ann and Dick provided the studio space and atmosphere to create art and hold non-judgmental conversations about art. Ann had the ability to communicate fundamental ideas about art that did not depend on technique. This was very liberating. The language she used to explain art opened things up. Ann wanted everyone to find his/her own individual voice. S & I soon became an artistic community, buzzing with a feeling of great personal discovery, creative excitement, and, above all, respect. Nela was in the right place at the right time and just bloomed. Her "seeing" world was opened up as a result. Indeed, she found her own way to express her "Me Nela" creative voice. She became a committed artist.

Nela has been an active and valued member of Sight & Insight (now the O'Hanlon Center for the Arts) for over 40 years. She has sustained important working relationships with fellow artists and colleagues, participating in workshops, juried exhibitions and one-woman shows. She is a generous supporter of the art center and for several years served on its Board. In 2001, with Suzi Martin, she was editor of a posthumously published collection of Ann O'Hanlon's essays, *seeing / perception, looking at the world through an artist's eye*.

Drawing and Calligraphy and the Influence of Place

For many years, Nela has been meeting regularly with artist and good friend, Dorothy Porter. They paint en plein air and often work in their hand made books. No pages are torn out or edited. They are what they are. Nela works fast. Dorothy comments, "Nela can look at something – a mountain, a bouquet, a group of people in a restaurant – , and with her first mark, capture its essence." The books are also places where Nela writes almost-haikus. In time, Nela's exquisite drawings and watercolors will be

incorporated into a second volume, but it is worth mentioning here because behind much of her art in this book lies the muscle of confident drawing. Often the difference between drawing and painting is successfully fused.

Coming from the flat and horizontal landscape of Louisiana, Nela fell in love with the California mountains and Yosemite, where she has spent almost every summer camping and drawing. When Nela paints a mountain she understands what a mountain is.

Nela is in tune with and humbled by Nature. She lives high above San Francisco Bay, her home overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay with their constant changes of light and atmosphere. She uses these topics as explorations.

Two visits to Japan were a natural influence to absorb. “I had always worked fast and loved discovering the *thereness* of sumi ink.”

Exploration and Balance

As you will see Nela is just as comfortable using subject matter as not. If you ask her about, let's say, a painting that resembles a mountain, she will tell you that yes, it's from “the Mountains” but she will also point out that the mountain is a “scaffold” for what she wants to explore, whether it is energy or vertical nature or balance between light and dark.

For all the geometry in her work, you might think Nela was a math wiz. But no. “My brother was good at math,” she says. “I was hopeless. I'm interested in shapes. They provide a sense of order... and I'm more comfortable with order than chaos.” She understands structure in painting because of years of artistic exploration. She spent a whole year just using a horizontal line as a focus for her paintings. “Where I grew up, it was flat for miles and miles,” she says. Other explorations have included using circles (“You can never have too many circles,”) squares, triangles, the vertical and diagonal, and color.

Another year, Nela used only green. She has no fear of color. Those colors come straight from the tube and are then mixed on the canvas. She can handle everything from primaries to the most subdued palette. She has also tackled silver and gold, with its hard to manage reflective surfaces, and makes it look easy. Color is often a starting place for Nela; she's interested in where it leads her and thrilled at the surprises it brings. "I'm still trying to discover color," Nela says.

Spirited and Spiritual

The joyful energy you see in Nela's paintings is an expression of freedom. "When I paint it's freedom, freedom from rules and expectations." She admits that sometimes the work is "more gregarious than I feel." Fellow artist Brett Hopper calls it "the expression of a free spirit who loves to take chances."

But there is also a quiet, contemplative side to Nela's work, inspired by her love of nature and her faith. You can feel the universal spirit. Both her father and brother were clerics, and Christianity is also an important part of her life. Nela goes to her local church every Sunday, but describes herself as being more pragmatic and practical than spiritual.

The Jesus paintings were done over a number of years as a discipline during Lent. These, too, are explorations, but they're more personal examinations of belief, both nontraditional and down to earth.

Get to Know and Recognize Nela Through Her Work

If you know Nela and then look at her work, you will see not only that she expresses who she is, but also that she doesn't paint like anyone else. She took the O'Hanlon philosophy of exploration and added draftsmanship, together with her spirited personality and honesty and came up with her own language.

Nela has distinct memories about almost all of her paintings. This collection begins with *Turn, Turn, Turn*, because it is Nela's favorite painting. "*Turn, Turn, Turn*

feels successful,” she says. “It was based on the four seasons. It was not painted fast. I paid attention to what was happening. At one point I got stuck and left it. I came back from some traveling and knew exactly what the painting needed.”

Nela made a decision early on not to put dates on the back of her paintings. Art galleries have arcane rules about dating work and she didn’t believe in it. So when this book was being planned there was no restriction about it having to be in chronological order. Instead it was about finding connections between works.



Afterword: An Experience of Nela

Nela will always arrive in good spirits at the studio, with canvas and basket of paints and brushes in hand. The canvas is pinned to the wall, the paints in their tubes are chosen and carefully laid out, and then she begins humming. Decisions are made fast and furious and she's done! Fellow painters in the studio are left in the dust, pondering their works in progress.

Later when we look at and discuss her work, she embraces the results, seeing what is there for what is there. Nothing more. She doesn't fuss over her work. If she decides an addition to the work is needed, it is applied with the same speed and confidence. It is spirited work. That's how Nela paints. And if you were to ask her many friends if she's like her paintings, no doubt they would all say yes.

_ Jeremy Thornton, January 2009