



ellen soffer



# ellen soffer : pink sky

**RECENT PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER**

JANUARY 26 - APRIL 8, 2023

artspace  
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# Curator's Forward

By Kelly McDade

*Ellen Soffer: Pink Sky* is a collection of more than sixty recent paintings and works on paper reflecting four years of intense work. During this period, Soffer has remained dedicated to her ongoing exploration of what painting is about, its use and purpose in her life. This body of new work expresses a deep commitment to continue pressing forward, documenting the present moment within the artist's studio.

Soffer has created works that chart her own path. She writes: "Working in paint's nonverbal language, I begin to recognize figurative or associative elements as they emerge from the push and pull of gestural lines and overlapping forms. Content and meaning come afterward by carefully reflecting on how individual paintings relate to current and past bodies of work. Their correlations and narrative are not literal, and the spaces are deliberately ambiguous." Where someone might interpret these paintings as light-hearted explorations, her color combinations, brushstrokes, and compositions are intentional, evidence of the artist's focused process of contemplation and circumspection.

Having practiced poetry prior to becoming a painter, Soffer still carries the acute sensitivity of a poet to life, language, and meaning. She translates that sensitivity into fascinating visual imagery. Much like a poem, these images are concentrated; each one is rich, full of resonance, and relevant. Her paintings operate on at least two levels, one purely visual and the other metaphorical. In the same way that a poet uses language to get into and go beyond the surface, so, too, do Soffer's paintings reflect the simple experience of daily life, while also investigating life beyond the obvious.

Engaging and accessible, her paintings provide an opportunity for viewers to join Soffer in her exploration and encourage us all to reflect on our own experience. The paintings operate more like open-ended investigations, rather than as declarations, which can be a bit unsettling...I would suggest unsettling in a good way. The body of work in *Ellen Soffer: Pink Sky* takes us

beyond ourselves and at the same time into ourselves. This exhibition is an invitation to follow Soffer's lead - to open up, look and listen closely. This is important work for all of us. The experience of investigating Soffer's work is more a journey than a destination. My hope is that this collection of paintings serves as an opportunity for deeper knowledge about the power and potential of art in general, and the work of Soffer, specifically. Her work is worthy of our attention.



*Kelly McDade is part-time curator, full-time educator, and consistent advocate for artists. She is Professor of Art and Humanities at Bossier Parish Community College and Louisiana Tech University, also serving as Co-Founder and Co-Curator of the Donna Service Gallery. McDade has collaborated with local, regional, and national artists on community programs and with various organizations, including the Ross Lynn Foundation, the Renzi Education and Art Center, and the Shreveport Regional Arts Council. Throughout these projects she has worked closely with diverse communities, serving Northwest Louisiana through the arts. She has a passion for connecting professional artists with the public, to facilitate meaningful projects with a lasting impact, believing that art has the power to bring people together. McDade is also an artist in her own right and has exhibited in Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, and Belize.*

*McDade has a Master of Liberal Arts with a focus in Art History from Louisiana State University in Shreveport and holds a combined Bachelor of Arts in Art History and Philosophy from Newcomb College of Tulane University. She has lived and worked in Shreveport-Bossier City for more than 30 years.*

# The Inner Landscape of Ellen Soffer

By Robert L. Pincus



**First Page**, 2019, oil and oil stick on linen, 72 x 36 inches

“A rose is a rose is a rose,” Gertrude Stein famously declared in a 1913 poem, “Sacred Emily.” These words endure as a crisp and elegant statement that a thing is simply what it is. But at the same time, she is saying more than that. Stein also hints at the infinite possibilities that go along with perceiving a rose. When she repeated the famous statement again, in her book *As Fine as Melanctha*, she added to it and gave us a little lesson in the inexhaustibility of looking at a rose -- or anything else. Stein wrote, “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. It continues with blooming and it fastens clearly upon excellent examples.” We look for excellent examples in art, in literature and in every other art form, which is to say we look for the flower seen anew, for anything and everything seen anew, transformed by the vision of a compelling artist.

I thought of Stein’s words while reflecting on many of the vibrantly colored and exquisitely structured paintings that Ellen Soffer has created during the past four or so years. Flowers are only one sign of the natural world that emerges in these paintings; birds, sea, and sky are others. But it would be misleading to say she is painting these or other things explicitly. Images emerge from looking within, as she explains. “My intention,” she has written, “is to capture the impressions and sensations left behind from dreams, emotions, or memories without being limited to the specific details of the events themselves.”

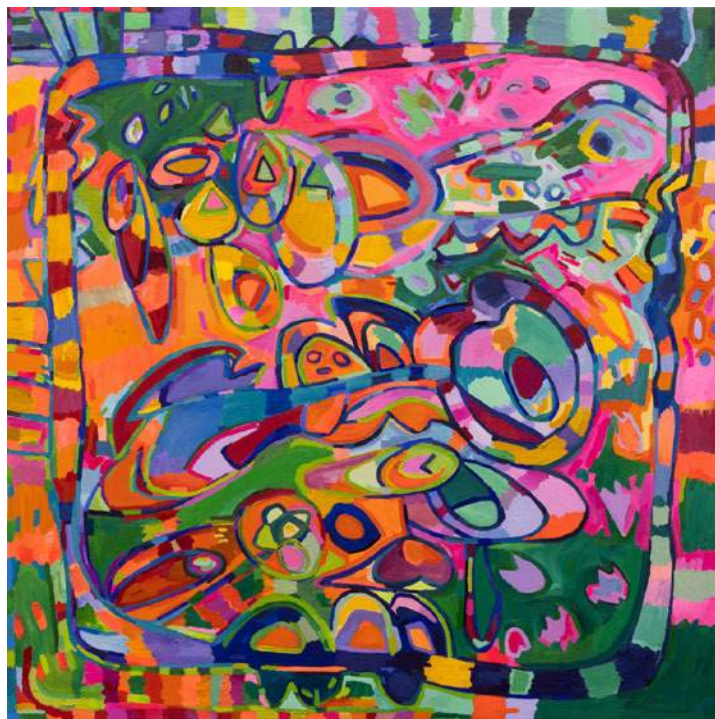
While we should never adhere solely to an artist’s intentions, this statement about her approach feels true to the work. It illuminates how the physical world takes shape in her paintings. The forms that emerge in the brilliantly colored circular canvas *Summer Flower* don’t become a readily identifiable species of flower, but impressions and sensations of one, filtered through her intense engagement with color, shape, mark-making and an inner sense of the subject. The composition that emerges in *Pink Sky 3* isn’t a sky, in any direct way, but an intricate web of shapes, some figurative and some not. But the presence of flower or sky in these

paintings, representative of her recent work in oils, carry with them the relationship between the world and the artist, made visual in the complex interplay of perception, memory, and making that animates her paintings. In short, her art transforms nature, dynamically, persuasively, and pleasurably.

Her oil paintings and works on paper dating from 2019, which are the focus of this catalog and the exhibition it accompanies, represent an impressive period of creativity for an artist who has already been producing a vibrant and rich body of work reaching back to the 1980s. She came of age as an artist in an era when painting had survived an era of skepticism about its continuing vitality, studying at the Philadelphia College of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Land Art had all shifted attention away from painting to works that tested the parameters of art itself beginning in the 1960s. But by the mid to late 1970s, Pattern and Decoration work, Feminist art that made use of fabric, stitching and quilting, Post-Minimalist painting as well as the first stirrings of Neo-Expressionism raised the profile of painting. Artists were exploring new possibilities for image, abstraction and color. One inspiring example, Cynthia Carlson, taught at the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts) during her time there. Soffer took inspiration elsewhere too, from painters both past and contemporaneous: Jackson Pollock (particularly his images steeped in myth and archetypal symbolism), Milton Resnick, and Elizabeth Murray, among others.

Mentors and influences act as guideposts to an artist's vision, but they never really explain how an inventive painter creates what they do. Case in point: Soffer's prolific Shimmer series, which spanned the years 2012 to 2018. It connects her to this expressive strain of painters, with their blurring of the boundaries between abstraction and figuration. But the approach is her own. In these Shimmer paintings, pattern meets color in a way that hints lushly at fluidity in nature, at light playing on water, without representing anything specific in the natural world.

You can detect the presence of the Shimmer series in her newer paintings, in the way color meshes seamlessly with short brushstrokes in paintings like *First Page* and *Green*



Pink Sky 3, 2022, oil and flashe on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



ellen soffer : pink sky exhibition

*Dream*. But it's as if something stirred the regular rhythm of the surface; repetition has been replaced by graceful, irregular currents of color. Even the dark line that travels around the edges of *Green Dream*, as a slender framing device, look as if it is bending here and there along with the general pattern of line and color that curves gently across the painting. The effect is similar in *First Page*, though the framing device at the borders of the painting is more pronounced, the color deeper.

A title like *First Page* strongly signals that Soffer was aware of a breakthrough, of the onset of a dynamic new phase in her paintings. There is exuberance to these works, small and large. It is palpable in compositions on paper (eight by eight inches), most in gouache and watercolor but some in oil or mixed media. *Blue Mountain* conveys no recognizable landscape forms, but it is an elegant mosaic of small shapes punctuated by a cool blue. Likewise, *Winter Sky* isn't sky-like, but its pale blues are pleasingly icy. Other small paintings make beautiful use of the framing device used to such dynamic effect in *First Page*. In the subtly elegant #27, a pattern of blues surround a central composition in slightly different blues. All these little works are shaped differently, adding to their character.

One of the important qualities of Soffer's art is her comfort with painting on different scales. I never feel as if she is simply trying to do a smaller version of a larger painting or vice versa. Form and pattern fit its space with uncanny consistency. Paradoxically, she is so successful in a formal sense because she isn't self-consciously formalist; Soffer lets shapes and forms emerge as a composition unfolds.

She clearly believes in painting as a medium for giving shape to her inner landscape. Her powers of invention, her virtuosity with oils, are at a very high level in these paintings. Abstract at one turn and figurative at another, Soffer's art shows us why painting will continue to fascinate those who love the way this medium can create an alternate world -- in the hands of the artist with enough vision and ingenuity to make that kind of magic happen.

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**Summer Flower**, 2022, oil on canvas, 30 inch diameter

Robert L. Pincus has been an art critic, author, book critic, and art historian for more than four decades. He was the staff art critic of *The San Diego Union-Tribune* for 25 years and has written for most major art magazines as well as *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He is the author of a groundbreaking book on the American sculptors Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, ***On a Scale That Competes with the World***, as well as numerous exhibition catalogs and essays for books such as *W.D.'s Midnight Carnival, Sophie Calle; The Reader, But Is It Art?, The Spirit of Art as Activism*, and most recently, *Faiya Fredman*, which chronicles the work of an important San Diego based artist. He has also been the curator of an innovative visiting critics program in Shreveport, Louisiana, *Critical Mass*, since 2012, a program he helped create for the Shreveport Regional Art Council.

Pincus holds a combined PhD in Art History & English from the University of Southern California, where he also received his MA in American Studies. He teaches at the California State University, Long Beach and the University of San Diego. He is the recipient of numerous awards and journalism prizes for his art writing.

# Interview: Ellen Soffer and Mary Tomás

**Mary Tomás:** Can you provide some history about how you became an artist?

Ellen Soffer: I always liked to do little drawings and things like that when I was younger. I was more serious in high school when I became interested in photography. I went to college as a photography major. Then in college, I incorporated painting with my photographs. Later I was in the fibers department and doing mixed media, and then I went into the painting department, where eventually painting became my main thing. After getting my BFA in painting, I went to graduate school, focusing on painting.

**MT:** Is there a particular artist or artwork that returns to you in your studio work?

ES: During my work on the Shimmer series, I was looking at Joan Mitchell and Milton Resnick. Then with the shape paintings, I was thinking about Elizabeth Murray. When I first started learning about painting, I liked Picasso and Matisse, that sort of modernism.

There are so many painters I like, it is hard for me to just say one or two. Different years there's different artists I might be thinking about more. I don't really know who I'm thinking about consciously. Even though I look at a lot of work, what I'm interested in is the paint quality, the color and structure of the works of other artists.

**MT:** You're inspired by all types of artists, but you seem to be on your own journey. Would you say that is true?

ES: Yes.

**MT:** Can you describe what motivates you to keep propelling your work forward?

ES: I really like painting, and I really want to see what's next. I want to make more paintings and better paintings, and it's exciting to start a painting and start a new group of paintings and see where they'll go.

**MT:** When did color become a focus of your work?

ES: My work had that multicolor feeling to it in college, since I was in my 20s.

**MT:** How do you approach your large paintings differently from your smaller works on paper?

ES: The smaller works on paper come together a lot faster, and I finish them in a shorter period of time. I can explore a lot of different ideas faster on paper because I usually can do them more quickly. With the bigger paintings the ideas change because they take so long, so the larger paintings often change a lot more.



**MT: When you start a large work do you have an idea that you follow?**

ES: I start off with an idea. I map out the canvas with different shapes. Then I either totally change it, or I build it up based on how I start, with the shapes or a frame, or some kind of structural device. Then if I've totally wiped it out, there might just be a little bit from the beginning. Or if I've decided to strengthen that initial drawing or how I put things on the canvas, it's either I'm starting fresh based on how the paint is in the beginning or I'm building up what I started, and only changing it a little, like, color relationships. There are different ways it can go.

**MT: Are you ever surprised by what comes up in your work?**

ES: Yes. Sometimes certain shapes surprise me. When I first started getting away from the Shimmers I started to see animals in my paintings, I was surprised.

**MT: What I hear you saying is that a lot of what you're responding to is intuitive. Does that sound accurate?**

ES: Yes.

**MT: Is your process more visceral or more cerebral?**

ES: Visceral. I'm working intuitively. I'm just trying to get into a certain state where I'm making decisions but I'm not thinking about them consciously.

**MT: One of the things that I've always admired about your work was your ability to express yourself with a lot of different colors. They all seem to have a cohesiveness about them. Did you study a lot of color theory?**

ES: I had some basic exposure to color theory when I was in school. I read books along the way on color theory, but I

don't really think about it. However, when I was doing the Shimmer series, I would alternate color groups. I could break my little rules, but it was a way to have some structure in the painting.

**MT: What are you most interested in when you're working in the studio?**

ES: I'm trying to push my paintings forward, and finish paintings. I really like to start paintings and I like the middle of the paintings, but then the hardest part is deciding when it's done. I don't want to overdo it.

**MS: What do you want to accomplish in your work?**

ES: I want to keep working, and developing new bodies of work, and seeing what that is in terms of the paintings.

Excerpt from an interview with Ellen Soffer, conducted by Mary Tomás.

*Mary Tomás is the former director and owner of the Mary Tomás Gallery in Dallas, TX and currently an artist and art consultant working and living in Tennessee.*



**Current 2**, 2018, oil on canvas, 30 x 60 inches (above)

**Surface of the River**, 2017, oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches (opposite page)

Both images from the 2012-2018 Shimmer series.



**Form 2**, 2020, oil and flashe on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



**Landscape with Mountain**, 2022, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches



**This Year**, 2020, acrylic, watercolor, flashe, and gouache on paper, 30 x 22.5 inches



#30, 2020, acrylic, watercolor, flashe, oil pastel, and gouache on paper, 30 x 22 inches



**Purple Side**, 2022, oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches



Red Bird and Butterfly, 2019, oil on canvas, 30 inch diameter



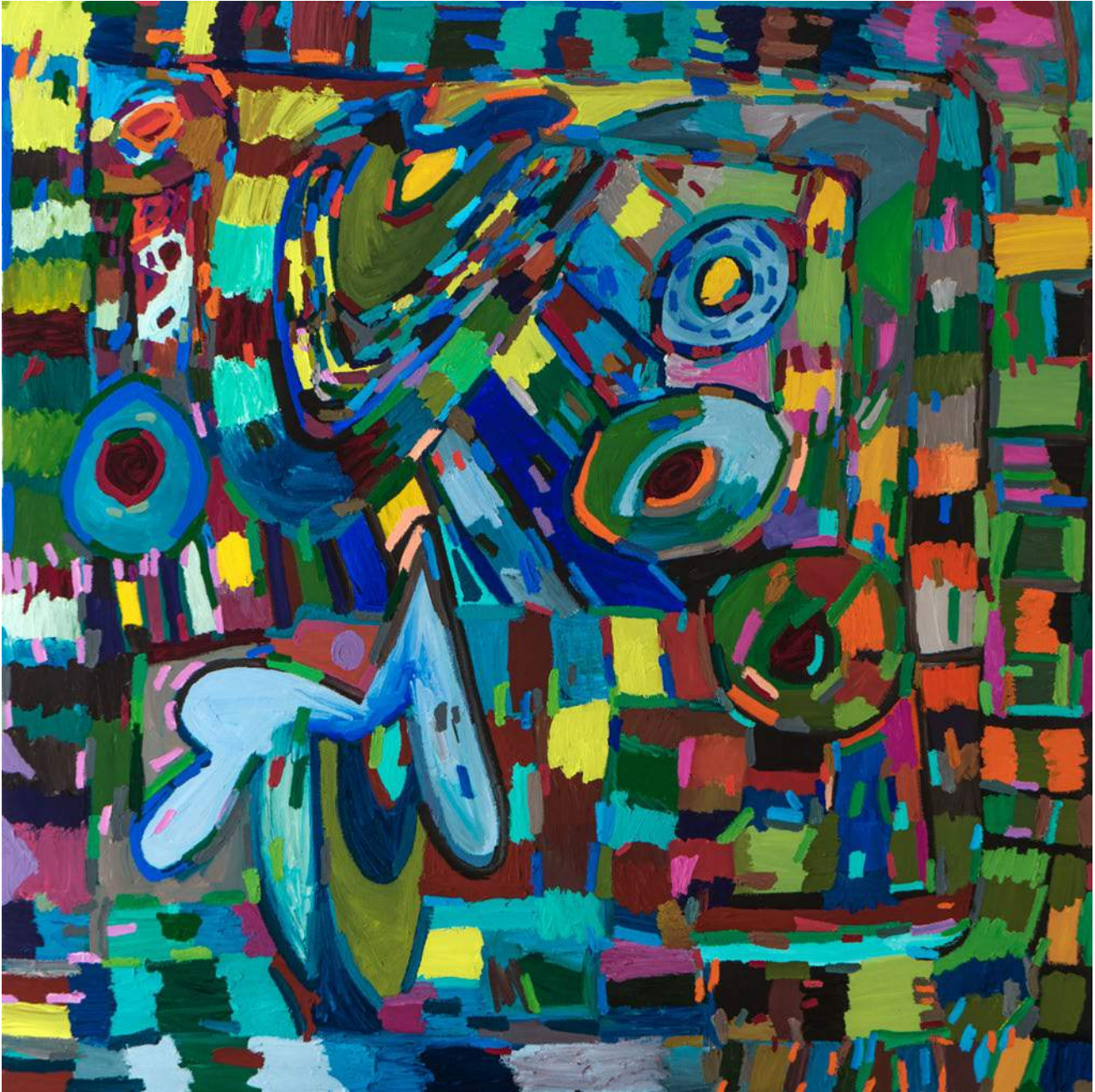
**Green Wave**, 2022, oil on canvas, 30 inch diameter



Pink Sky 3, 2022, oil and flashe on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



Red Flower 2, 2019, oil on canvas, 30 inch diameter



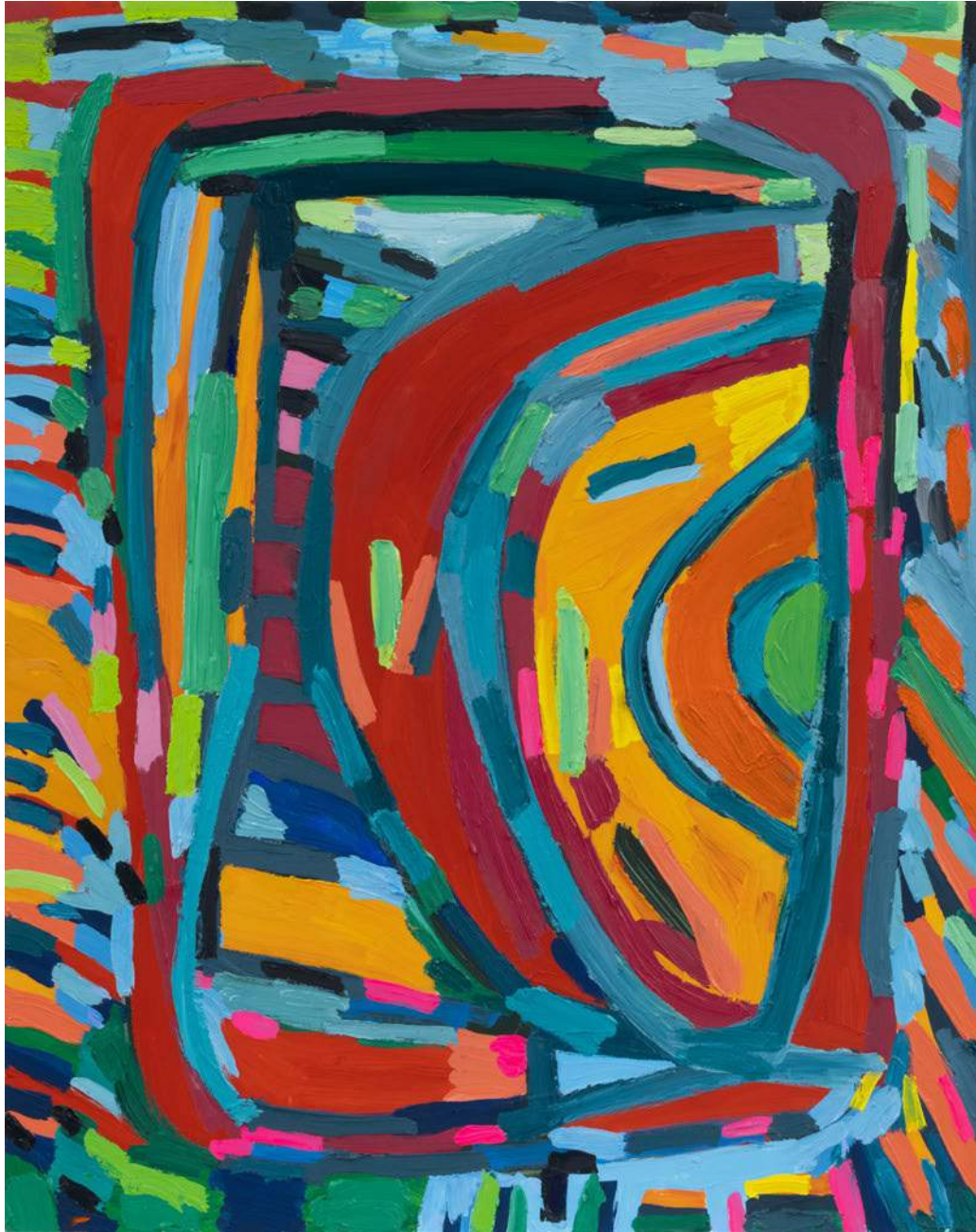
**Whisper**, 2019, oil on linen, 38 x 38 inches



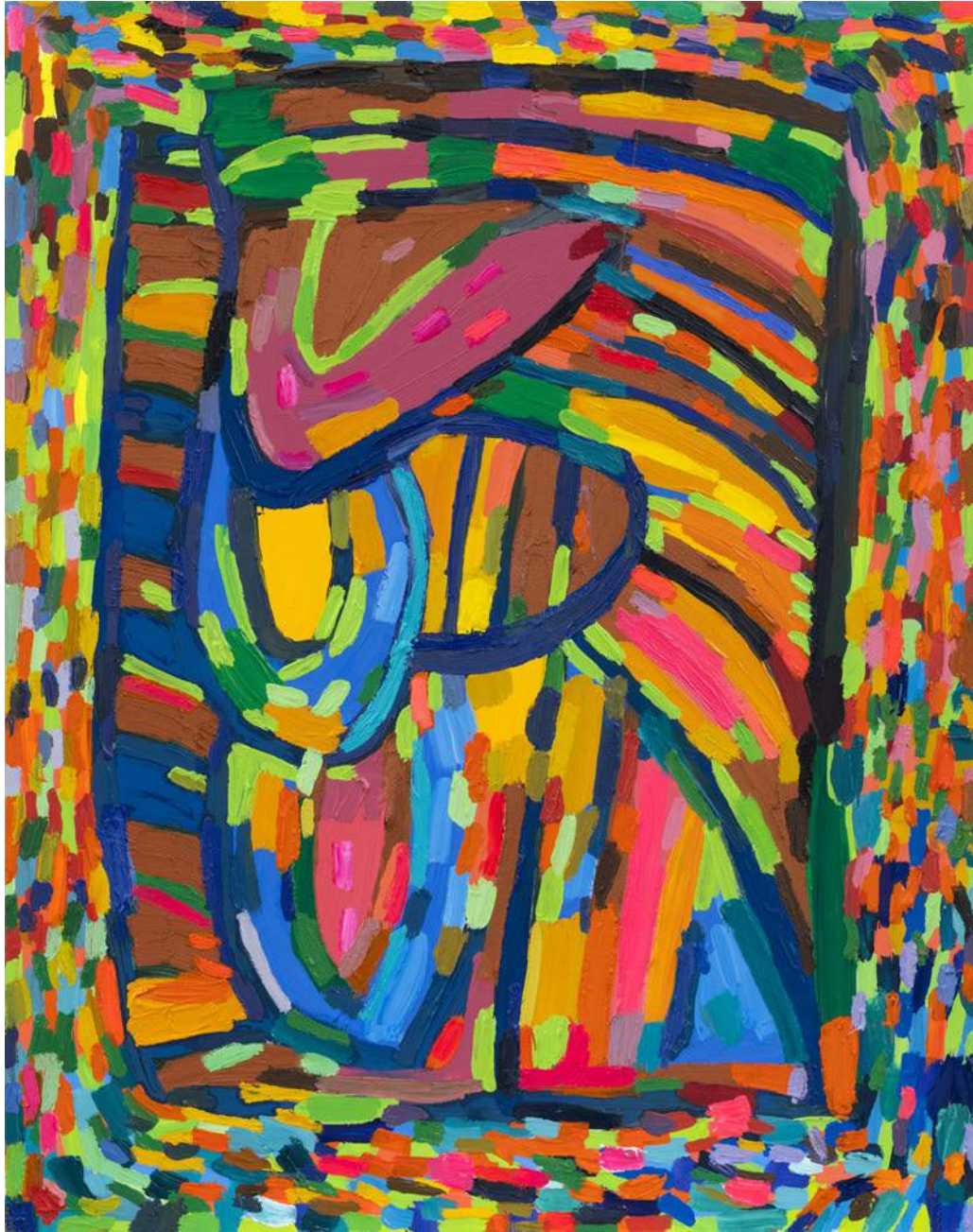
Shell 2, 2020, oil and flashe on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



**Blue Bird 2**, 2022, oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches



Summer Landscape 3, 2022, oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches



Summer Landscape 2, 2022, oil on panel 20 x 16 inches



**Suspended**, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



**Butterfly 3**, 2020, oil on canvas, 38 x 38 inches



**Butterfly**, 2020, oil and flashe on canvas, 48 x 48 inches



April, 2019, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



**Yellow Structure**, 2020, oil on panel, 24 x 24 inches



**Circuit**, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



**Pink Slice**, 2021, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches



March, 2019, oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

# ELLEN SOFFER

Born: 1957, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

## Education

- 1983 MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 1981 BFA with Honors, Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1981 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME

## Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2023 **Ellen Soffer: Pink Sky, Recent Paintings and Works on Paper**, artspace, Shreveport, LA (Curated by Kelly McDade), Catalog
- 2018 **Some Are Poems**, Bossier Parish Community College, The Learning Commons, Bossier City, LA
- 2016 **Yellow Wind, Night Garden**, Acadiana Center for the Arts, Coca-Cola Studio, Lafayette, LA (Curated by Brian Guidry)
- 2015 **Ellen Soffer: The Other Side of Yellow**, Magale Library Gallery, Centenary College of Louisiana, Shreveport, LA
- 2014 **Ellen Soffer: The Shimmer Series**, Peacock Gallery, Middle Georgia State College, Cochran, GA (Curated by Charlie Agnew)
- 2012 **Ellen Soffer: Eccentric Color**, Magale Library Gallery, Centenary College of Louisiana, Shreveport, LA
- 2007 **Candy Mountain and Other New Works**, artspace, Shreveport, LA
- 1993 **Ellen Soffer: Louisiana Paintings**, Nexus/Foundation for Today's Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1988 **Ellen Soffer: Recent Works on Paper**, Stoner Arts Center, Shreveport, LA
- 1987 **Ellen Soffer: Paintings**, Nexus/Foundation for Today's Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1985 **Ellen Soffer: Paintings**, Nexus/Foundation for Today's Art, Philadelphia, PA

## Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2022 **Triologue**, featuring Selena Dixon, Todd Camplin, and Ellen Soffer, Mesquite Arts Center, Mesquite, TX  
**REFUGE**, The MAC, Dallas, TX  
**CHAOS! 8**, Ro2 Art, Dallas, TX  
**2022 Collectible Artists**, Central ARTSTATION, Shreveport, LA  
**Critical MASS 10**, artspace, Shreveport, LA, Catalog  
**HOLIDAY**, LABspace, Hillsdale, NY  
**Select 2022**, Garvey/Simon, online Artsy exhibition and in NY location (Curated by Elizabeth K. Garvey)
- 2021 **Critical MASS 9**, artspace, Shreveport, LA  
**Looking Forward**, Carter Burden Gallery, New York, NY (Juried by Nancy Azara)
- 2020 **Brand 48 Annual National Juried Exhibition of Works on Paper**, online exhibition, Brand Library & Art Center, Glendale, CA (Juried by Dan McCleary), Catalog
- 2019 **Impulse**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX  
**B.I.G, Bold, Impressive and Grand** – a Curated Exhibition, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX  
**Marks in Time** – Alan Dyson, Anthony Reans and Ellen Soffer, Louisiana State Exhibit Museum, Shreveport, LA (Curated by Nita Cole)
- 2018 **Genius Loci**, Castello di Spannocchia, Italy  
**Summer Group Exhibit**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX  
**Color Play**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2017 **Twelve**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX  
**Summer Group Exhibit**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX  
**Fresh**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, Texas
- 2016 **B16: Wiregrass Biennial**, Wiregrass Museum of Art, Dothan, AL (Curated by Dana-Marie Lemmer)  
**Summer Fun**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2015 **Longview Museum of Fine Arts East Texas Regional Artists Exhibit**, Longview, TX (Curated by Renee Hawkins)  
**CORE II**, Mary Tomás Gallery, Dallas, TX (Curated by Ashley Tatum)

- 2013 **Working It Out**, The Painting Center, New York, NY  
(Curated by Mona Brody, Alyce Gottesman, and Jo Ann Rothchild) Catalog
- 2011 **Surface**, The Wylie and May Louise Jones Gallery,  
Bakersfield College, Bakersfield, CA  
(Curated by Margaret Nowling)
- 2007 **Texas Artists Coalition Juried Membership Show**,  
Fort Worth Community Arts Center, Fort Worth, TX  
(Juried by Ed and Linda Blackburn) Honorable Mention
- 1991 **Louisiana Competition 1991**, Louisiana Arts and Science  
Center, Riverside Museum, Baton Rouge, LA  
(Juried by John Yau)
- 1990 **The Red Clay Survey**, Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville,  
AL (Juried by Dr. Harry Rand)
- Gallery Artists**, Nexus/Foundation for Today's Art,  
Philadelphia, PA
- Interstate 49: The Exhibition**, Alexandria Museum of Art,  
Alexandria, LA  
(Curated by Caroline Kennedy Stone and Steve Bradley)
- 1989 **Exhibitionism**, Nexus/Foundation for Today's Art,  
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- SPAR 1989 National Art Exhibition**, Barnwell Gardens and  
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RECENT PAINTINGS & WORKS ON PAPER

January 26 - April 8, 2023

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Installation by Kevin Rubén Jacobs

Art © Ellen Soffer

The Inner Landscape © Robert L. Pincus

Cover Image:

**Butterfly 2**, 2020, oil and flashe on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

Back Cover Image:

**Pink Sky 4**, 2022, oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas, 36 x 120 inches



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**Blue Forms**, 2022, oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas, 36 x 120 inches (top)

**Green Bird**, 2022, oil, acrylic, and flashe on canvas, 36 x 120 inches (bottom)



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