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Sept 2010 artist profile **elizabeth patterson**



Colored pencil may not be the most popular or poetic medium, but in the deft hands of LA artist Elizabeth Patterson, it proves surprisingly supple and evocative. Working off digital photographs with startling realism, Patterson depicts rain-swept highways and boulevards, as viewed through the blurred, rain-flecked scrim of a driver's windshield. Rendering these watery distortions with unlikely precision and bravura

effect, while shifting focus between background and foreground, she creates a world redolent in mystery and a haunting sense of passage.

"I just drive and snap, snap, snap," Patterson says of her image-gathering process. "I might have a couple thousand from one day, with maybe four or five that I like. If I'm lucky, I'll get one... It's a starting point; the drawing will be more powerful." Selecting the elements in the picture that she likes, Patterson enhances them, making the image her own. She draws on Bristol vellum, working typically on three or four works at once over several weeks, using a solvent to melt the pencil into the surface. "As you keep adding layers, you keep refining it."

In her recent solo show at Louis Stern Fine Arts, Patterson's masterful technique was given full display. In *Fay Lake Road, 12 PM* (2010), spanning an imposing 30 by 40 inches, she presents a curving two-lane highway; the blurred trees in the background on each side are interrupted by dappled raindrops in the foreground, bisected at a diagonal by a wayward streak of water. In *Route 136, no. 2* (2009), a windshield wiper has swept across the frame, resulting in a dramatic spatter hovering above the blur of oncoming headlights. In *Wilshire Boulevard, 5 PM* (2009), she offers a brooding, semi-abstracted image of glimmering headlights, taillights, and streetlights, the sort of found moment that seems both utterly banal and yet oddly resonant. "There's almost a sense of nostalgia, a touch of sadness..." she reflects, of her rainy scenarios. "Because you're isolated in your car, it's a sense of anonymity. We're always isolated in our own thoughts..."

Born in Gettysburg, PA, Elizabeth Patterson studied at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. In 1979 she came out to LA, where she

got involved in the Women's Building and volunteered with Judy Chicago, working on *The Dinner Party*. She had begun a tentative career in drawing in 1984 when the accident happened; while working as an offset printer, her hand got crushed in one of the presses. The injury required two years of surgery and constant therapy. "I couldn't use my hand at all, so I decided I couldn't be an artist anymore," she recalls. She gave up drawing entirely for 13 years. Around 1997, she became involved with a new partner; when Patterson finally revealed her previous drawings, her partner was appalled that she had stopped making art. "Within a week I had a drawing table in the living room."

Today, Patterson counts Vija Celmins as her favorite artist, and has been involved in the CPSA (Colored Pencil Society of America) for nine years. In 2008, she even quit her job doing I.T. at UCLA. Her studio is a neat, bright shed behind her North Hollywood home; inside, her colored pencils are pristinely arrayed near her drawing table and other tools. "I like the fact that I make drawings," she says, smiling, in her sanctuary. (She hasn't done a painting since art school; "too messy," she explains.) Then she returns to her latest work: a view of the Ventura Freeway in the rain, lit by orange ovals from the taillights up ahead. As she leans over it, the drawing hovers in its unresolved state: suspended tantalizingly between incident and void, between dusk and daylight, between stasis and voyage, between clarity and the unknown.

—GEORGE MELROD

"Chasing the Rain: Drawings by Elizabeth Patterson" was on view from June 19 - August 28, 2010, at Louis Stern Fine Arts, in West Hollywood, CA.
www.louissternfinearts.com



"ROUTE 136, NO. 2"
2009

COLOR PENCIL, GRAPHITE AND
SOLVENT ON STRATHMORE VELLUM
21" x 26"

PHOTO: COURTESY LOUIS STERN FINE ARTS