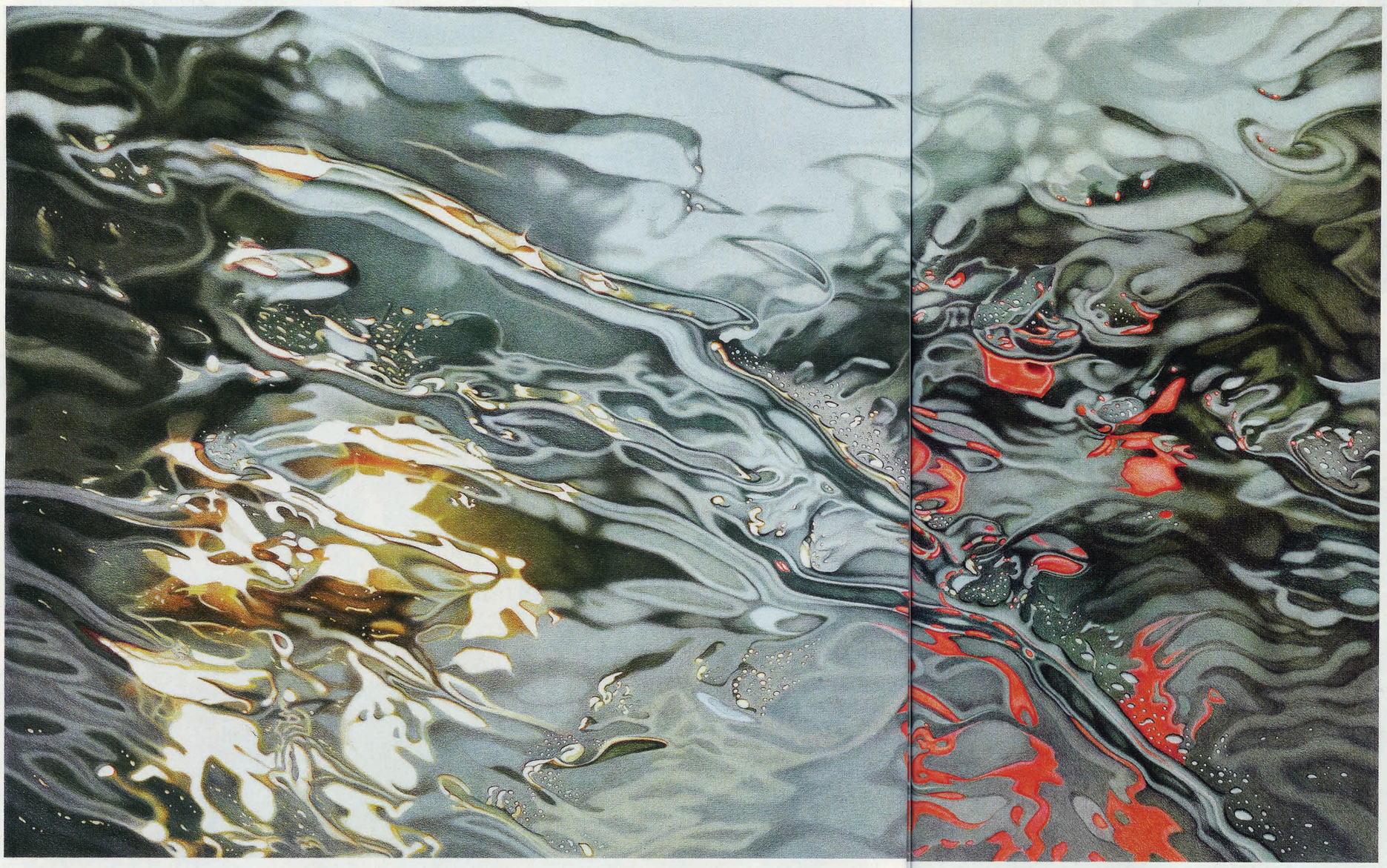
RAINY DAY WO MAN

Using colored penci **Elizabeth Patterson** captures patterns of water and ight that exist only for a moment, before windshie d wipers clear them away

INTERVIEW BY AUSTIN R WILLIAMS



Golden Chain Highway, Jackson

2012, colored pencil, 24 x 36. Collection the artist.

All artwork this article courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood, California.

For many of us, rain and commuting are nuisances we'd sooner be done with, but for California artist Elizabeth Patterson, they are sources of vivid beauty. She has spent almost 10 years drawing the rainy views she sees out her windshield throughout Los Angeles and other locations across America. Her work is on the one hand highly realistic, filled with carefully delineated splashes, raindrops, headlights and taillights. But it is also ethereal, with harmonies and patterns that show a heightened view of reality. *Drawing* recently spoke with the artist about her work and her method for achieving such intricate drawings in the beautiful but labor-intensive medium of colored pencil.

DRAWING: *How did colored pencil become your medium of choice?*

ELIZABETH PATTERSON: By happenstance, in the early 1980s. My partner at that time was a photo retoucher, and she had a set of Prismacolor pencils she sometimes used. I'd always used graphite for drawing, but I started messing around with the Prismacolors. I liked them instantly, and I used them to create a series of abstract drawings. During that period, though, I had an accident, where my right hand was crushed in a machine. That brought my art career to a halt for 15 years. When I considered doing artwork again, colored pencil was the first thing I picked up. I haven't touched anything else since, except for graphite.

DR: *What about rain appeals to you as a subject? I expect it has both visual and thematic interest?*

EP: Who knows why you get drawn to certain things? For some reason water and weather have been themes throughout my career. When I was in art school I did a series on tornadoes. And when I came back to my art in the late 1990s, the first things I started drawing were water and undersea creatures. That morphed into drawing underwater figures, and I became increasingly absorbed in the distortions in the water—the figure

LEFT

Sepulveda Boulevard 5 p.m.

2009, colored pencil on museum board, 22 x 30. Private collection.

BELOW

Angeles Crest Highway No. 1

2009, colored pencil on illustration board, 20 x 30. Private collection.

was almost secondary. What made it interesting to me was what the water did to the figure. When you add water to any object, it becomes more interesting. You can do the same subject over and over and it will continually change. It's a sort of infinite possibility.

I was doing those figures, and one day I was on my way home from work and I was annoyed—there was rain and traffic. All of a sudden I started looking at these patterns on the windshield and at the very diffused background out the window. It blew me away. You have this shifting, changing canvas, and then the wipers go across and change it all. I was beside myself with this imagery. I happened to have my camera with me, and I started taking pictures.

This was in 2006. I didn't know if anyone would like or buy the drawings—I remember thinking, "Who in Los Angeles likes cars and rain?" But the first drawings sold right away. I kept drawing them, and I don't feel done with them at all.

DR: *Many of your drawings court abstraction at the same time that they are extremely realistic. Do you consciously navigate between realism and abstraction as you draw?*

EP: That's something I've become more and more attracted to. When you work on a subject for a long time, things start to transform. In my earlier pieces the background and foreground are all in focus. In 2008 I became a full-time artist for the first time, and suddenly I was drawing nonstop. I did not understand the impact on skill and thought process that would

occur. I quickly got tired of realism, tired of defining things in the same way. The way I interpreted subject matter started to change.

Right now I'm experimenting with asking how much information the viewer needs in order to see what's there. I want the drawing to be something the viewer can relate to, but I want it to be something you might need to look at for a while. Some things I'm keeping—almost every drawing I've done in this series is a view out the car window with a vanishing point, and that's staying the same. But other things are falling away, and I'm having a lot of fun with that.

DR: *Between the traffic and the rain, there seems to be a bit of excitement or even danger in many of your drawings.*

EP: I do like to have some tension in the drawing, compositionally or through choice of color, although when I'm working I don't think about it a lot. I just feel it, and my hand reaches for the colors. But I've never thought of the word "danger" in relation to my drawings. For quite some time I did drive by myself and take pictures, which was dangerous. I don't do that anymore. Imagine saying to a judge, "Your honor, I did it for art."

PATTERSON'S MATERIALS

COLORED PENCILS:

Caran d'Ache Luminance
Caran d'Ache Pablo
Faber-Castell Polychromos
Prismacolor

SURFACES:

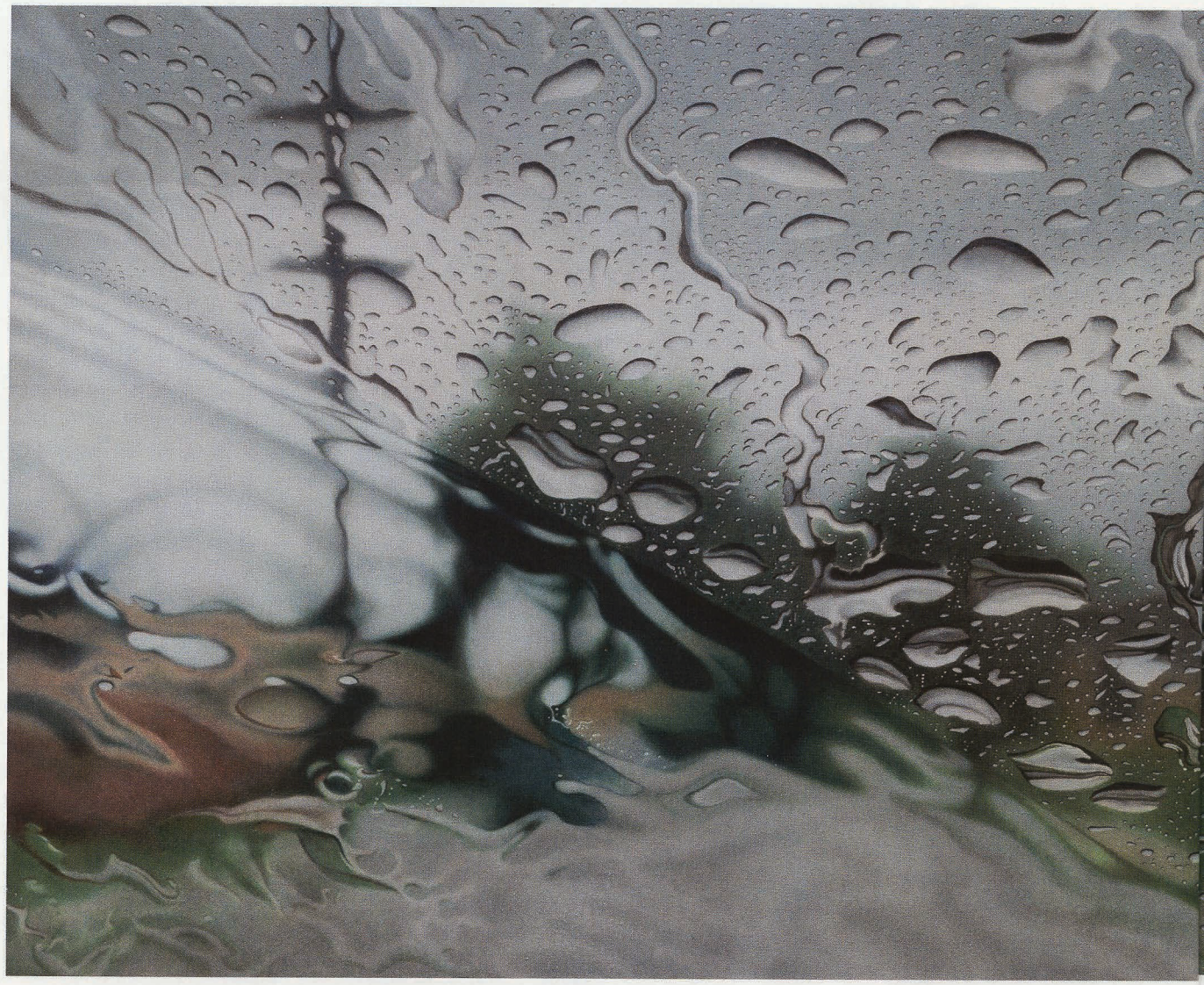
Strathmore illustration board ("When want texture, the artist says.)
Strathmore plate-surface Bristol board ("For smaller pieces.")

"When you add water to any object, it becomes very interesting You can do the same subject over and over and it will never be the same. It's a sort of infinite possibility"

DR: *Your drawings depict locations across the country—do you think of them as a sort of travelogue or document of America?*

EP: I don't get too involved in asking, "What does it mean?" and all that. But there is some of that there, and initially the drawings were really about Los Angeles. Having lived in this city for decades, I feel there is this car culture and accompanying anonymity that seems rather unique. We spend so much of our lives in this vehicle, and the other vehicles we see are just vehicles—there are no people attached to them. It's a weird alone time people have.

There are certain other places I've been that have affected me deeply, like New Orleans. *34th Street, New Orleans* is one of the few drawings where I think there's a message. That's close to one of the levies that broke, and that area was covered under eight or 12 feet of water. In the palette of that drawing is a lot of sadness. But in most cases I'm just looking for something visually stimulating that I want to capture.



RIGHT

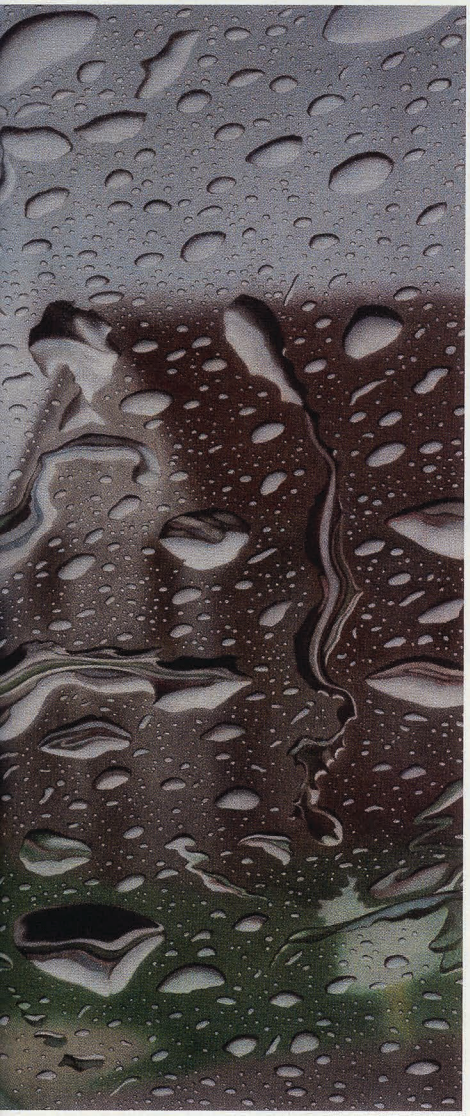
Highway 12, San Andreas

2011, colored pencil, 26 x 38. Collection the artist.

BELOW

34th Street, New Orleans

2011, colored pencil, 25 x 40. Private collection.



DR: *How do you gather reference material?*

EP: I use a camera, although I'm a terrible photographer. I don't have the patience to really learn photography—I just have cameras that I can turn on and use some features. I don't care where I am or whether it's a recognizable place. All I care about is the image. I'm just composing—everything goes by so fast, that's all there's time for. It's pretty hard when you're bumping around—there's so much motion and activity going on. In my drawings, I want that feeling to come alive. I live for that moment when you put the drawing on the easel and step back and it's starting to move. Those elements of rain and motion together with a shifting background create this possibility on a two-dimensional surface.

Most of my photos I mess around with a little bit in Photoshop. I'll take an element from one photo and add it to another or change the color or the highlight—all kinds of manipulating. When I have what I want, in the interest of time I project the image and draw out the shapes in graphite. My first pass over the page is just shapes—it doesn't even matter what the objects are. Later I'll put that on the easel and step back and the shapes will resemble a composition.

DR: *Once that initial graphite image is complete, how does the drawing progress?*

EP: Once the shapes are down I start pulling them together and turning it all into cohesive, moving, living imagery. Other than getting the lines on the paper, I never know what I'm going to do. I pick up my initial set of pencils, maybe 20, and I just get in this zone. If I think too much or have stuff on my mind, it really intrudes. But when the planets are aligned just right, it's wonderful. It's so much fun I can't even tell you. For every day I get to do this I feel so fortunate.

Typically I get a few layers on the paper, then I usually hit that with some solvent. I let that dry a bit, then while it's still damp I add another layer of pencil and scrub the area with a stiff brush, which kind of scrubs the pigment into the paper. It looks like a mess, but that gets rid of the white specks of texture and gives me a new surface to draw on. It saves me time so that I don't have to layer and burnish and layer and burnish. Lately I've been sticking my stencil brush right into the solvent and scrubbing it. That works even better and faster.

DR: *Do you draw around white areas to save space for your highlights?*

EP: Mainly I use an electric eraser, a Sakura. I draw with that as much as I do with pencil. But dark colors will stain the paper, so a lot of time I draw around the lights. A piece like *Highway 12, San Andreas*—with so many shapes and so many whites and light blues and yellows—drove me crazy. Those light spots are on top of darks, which you can't erase effectively, so I was drawing around them.

Mulholland Drive No. 6
2009, colored pencil on illustration board, 24 x 40. Private collection.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Elizabeth Patterson is a Los Angeles artist whose work has been shown in exhibitions across the country, as well as in a 2012 solo exhibition in Paris. She is a signature member of the Colored Pencil Society of America and is represented by Louis Stern Fine Arts, in West Hollywood, California. She is currently preparing for a second solo exhibition in Paris. For more information, visit www.eapatterson.com.

DR: *How do you proceed once the paper is covered?*

EP: At that point—typically after a few days to a week, depending on size—what I have is a very rough resemblance of my reference. This is when the real work begins. Whatever I liked about my reference photo becomes exploited during this process as shapes are repositioned, colors mixed and altered, and many layers are added for volume. The drawing starts to take the shape of a flowing composition.

I often work left to right, continuously going back to the left side to refine the work. Sometimes I begin in a particular area because I need to establish values early on or work out a tricky area, lest I get in trouble later and have to backtrack and undo—something you prefer to avoid in colored pencil. I used to have a very specific routine, but I don't anymore. Now it's more of a flow that's different for each piece. I think that might mean I'm starting to trust myself. My goal is to pull the shapes and colors into to a living, moving experience that reflects that magical thing that happens when you feel rather than think when you make art. ❖