

## Mari O'Brien

### Aquarius 2017 First Place Award Winner



The Central Coast Watercolor Society's annual regional exhibition was held this year at the Art Center Morro Bay. The juror, Keiko Tanabe, picked a striking, non-representational piece entitled "Flame Dancer" by Mari O'Brien as the first place winner. At the last board meeting a suggestion was made to include an interview of a CCWS Member as a feature in our quarterly newsletter. Brilliant idea, and to get the ball rolling we are

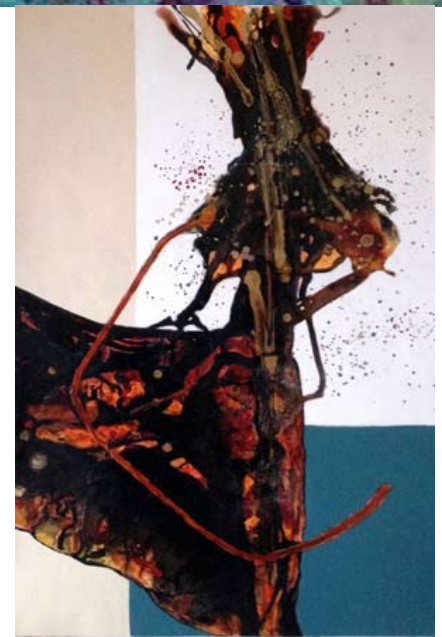
starting with Mari since she just took first place in the Aquarius Show. Others will follow in no particular order, but we will start with our Signature Members. This will be an occasional feature and may not be included each quarter.

When I congratulated Mari at the Aquarius reception she seemed delighted and genuinely surprised. Exhibiting since 2007, she has won at least eight other awards, has been accepted/juried into over 40 exhibitions and had four solo shows as well. She is a signature member of three watermedia societies including CCWS.

Read a few paragraphs on her website and you will immediately notice her advanced education shining through. She has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and a Masters in French. She was a professor for 25 years teaching French, English, Comparative Literature, Women's Studies, and Humanities, and was honored in "Who's Who among America's Teachers" three times.

#### **Q. How long have you lived here on the Central Coast? How did you happen to settle here?**

**A.** My husband and I recently celebrated five years in San Luis Obispo. We had been living in a Salt Lake City suburb for eight years, but I've had respiratory issues all my life, and the diminishing air quality in the Salt Lake Valley showed no sign of improving. So, first off, we wanted to find a place where the air would be healthier to breathe. Although there were many things we loved about Utah – especially the incredible beauty of the landscape nearly everywhere; the many art opportunities for me; and my association with the Utah Watercolor Society – we found the dominant culture nearly as oppressive as the bad air. So we also wanted to find a place where we would fit in better culturally for the time when we would retire. SLO seemed to fit the bill, so we jumped off the cliff, so to speak, and moved to the Central Coast. We sure do love breathing air refreshed by ocean breezes here on the left coast!



*First Place Award Winner, "Flame Dancer," by CCWS Signature Member, Mari O'Brien.*

#### **Q. Where did you teach?**

**A.** I taught during my grad school years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which included a year teaching in France. After I finished my Ph.D., I taught in Alabama for a year, then in New Mexico for five years, before accepting a tenure-track position at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, where I taught French language and literature, comparative literature, women's studies, and humanities for 14 years.

#### **Q. Were you making art while you were teaching, or is it a retirement activity?**

**A.** As a university professor, I had little time for art; it's a very demanding, time-consuming profession, what with teaching, research and publication, and service obligations. I realized, however, that art and design were calling to me again – strongly – when faculty were

encouraged to incorporate more technology into our courses. I began designing web pages for my classes using HTML code (that was the only way to do it back then!), finding that I was becoming more fascinated with the design aspects than with the content. After living apart from my husband, Tom, for more than five years, I decided to leave academia and join him in Utah, leaving my profession, colleagues and students behind. When he queried me about how I planned to fill my time, I told him that I wanted to return to art, something that had informed my childhood but that I had been away from over 30 years. He's always supported me in my decision, despite the fact that he's not always a fan of the style of art I make. So even though I wasn't "retired" at that point, art became my full-time pursuit – and I'm still at it!

encouraged to incorporate more technology into our courses. I began designing web pages for my classes using HTML code (that was the only way to do it back then!), finding that I was becoming more fascinated with the design aspects than with the content. After living apart from my husband, Tom, for more than five years, I decided to leave academia and join him in Utah, leaving my profession, colleagues and students behind. When he queried me about how I planned to fill my time, I told him that I wanted to return to art, something that had informed my childhood but that I had been away from over 30 years. He's always supported me in my decision, despite the fact that he's not always a fan of the style of art I make. So even though I wasn't "retired" at that point, art became my full-time pursuit – and I'm still at it!

**Q. You have mentioned that you are a "self-taught" artist, but you have studied with an impressive list of accomplished artists: Mark Mehaffey, Christopher Schink, Carla O'Conner, Linda Kemp, Robert Burridge, David Limrite and Barbara Nechis. Which teacher do you think influenced your current**

**non-representational style the most?**

**A.** That would be Mark Mehaffey. Prior to my workshop with Mark, I was painting small, realistic watercolors, either plein air or



*"Dreaming of a Good Drenching," part of the "Drips and Drought" series by Mari O'Brien, was juried into the 2017 Beacon Art Show.*

based on my photographs – nothing larger than 9"x12," very detailed. I had no idea how to paint loosely, plus painting in a larger format was something I could never imagine myself doing – terrifying! Mark taught

me the joys of painting both large and in an abstract and/or non-representational way. My whole world opened up then, and once I discovered the versa-

tility of acrylics, straight transparent watercolor lost some of its interest for me. Mark taught me that non-mimetic art was just as valid as representational painting – that I could make

the various elements/principles of art be my subject matter and that painting from an emotional core was just as valid as painting from objective reality. I liked his problem-solving approach

to painting. He also showed me a way to paint abstractly. He's a wonderful teacher, and he has been a great mentor to me over the years. And Christopher Schink – an expert on art history, an excellent writer and teacher, and a fabulous watercolor and acrylic artist – taught me a variety of paths to abstraction. I treasure the many "art history refresher course" moments that he shared during his workshops.

And when I say I am "self-taught," I just mean that I'm sort of an autodidact, a self-directed studier; I collect and read/view a large array of books or videos by artist-authors, experimenting with their techniques and approaches, using them as prompts for my own take on their practices. These include artists such as Nita Leland (my color guru); Joan Blackburn (her Exploring the Abstract is



*"Man Gazing at Two Goddesses," by Mari O'Brien, was juried into the 2017 Society of Layerists in Multi-Media's IV National Exhibition at the African American Performing Arts Center in Albuquerque, NM.*

my bible for abstract composition); Mary Todd Beam, Virginia Cobb (her video Acrylic Abstract Painting: The Evolving Image is one I return to again and again); and Chris Cozen, among many others.

**Q. You like to choose a new experimental focus at the start of each year. What is your focus for 2017 and how far along are you?**

# Interview

**A.** Although I continue my experiments with line and various compositional strategies, this year I've gone back to experimenting a bit with texture, plus I've added a focus on using acrylic paints in a more aqueous manner. I'm particularly drawn to acrylic inks. These inks are not just watered-down acrylics; they



Be sure to visit Mari's website and for a peek into her process as she talks about this beautiful "Abstract Floral" series. [mariobrien.com/Abstract-Florals.php](http://mariobrien.com/Abstract-Florals.php)

carry a substantial pigment load, so the coloring strength is as high as with more conventional acrylics paints. In fact, "Flame Dancer" came into being with a pour of acrylic and India inks into a swoosh of water painted across my support – plus the gold 'flourishes' on the figure were achieved with gold alcohol ink. I've fallen in love with fineline applicators, which allow me to make dots, lines, and drips with both acrylic inks and other inks with some precision. I've also been playing with water-soluble graphite. Fun, fun fun!! I'm a slow painter, in that I have lots and lots of starts, and it sometimes takes a good long while before I'm able to resolve them into a finished painting. So, even though my experimental focus may change every year, I really never stop working on those ex-

periments from a previous year.

**Q.** You credit Robert Burrige with teaching you the benefits of working in series. Is your recent Aquarius winner, "Flame Dancer" part of a series? If so, when will we see some of the other works in that series?

**A.** I don't conceive of a series in exactly the same way as Bob Burrige does; my series are more thematically-oriented, rather than technique-oriented warm-ups – which means, in the end, that I may use many different techniques in service to one overarching idea. "Flame Dancer" is part

of my series called "Drips and Drought," inspired by California's many years of drought and the perpetual longing for rain. I have four or five finished pieces in this series so far (they can be seen on my web site for now), but several more are underway. Nonetheless, I now take the notion of working in series very seriously, and I thank Bob for that! That said, I do plan to do many Bob-type small-scale "warm-up" paintings as I prepare for this year's Open Studios Art Tour.

**Q.** Do you paint every day?

**A.** I wish I could maintain a regular painting schedule, but life has a curious way of intervening. I try to visit my studio almost every day, even if it's just to look at what a mess it is, move some things around, or maybe gesso over a start I'm not happy with.

I often will work solidly every day for two weeks or so, than take another two weeks off, because of "home-improvement" projects we may be working on or company visiting. We do, after all, seem to run the "Hotel California" out of our home during the season!

*I want to thank Mari for taking time from her busy schedule to answer my interview questions and for all the work she does for CCWS as our Publicity Chair. Be sure to visit her beautiful website:*

[mariobrien.com](http://mariobrien.com)

*Dail Schroeder, Newsletter Design and Production.*

## Update

Mari's "Flame Dancer" has received two more awards: 2nd Place in the International Society of Acrylic Painters 8th Annual International Open Online Exhibition, and 1st Place in the International Society of Experimental Artists Annual Members Only Virtual Exhibit.

Her painting "Man Gazing at Two Goddesses" was juried into the 2017 Society of Layerists in Multi-Media's Merge IV National Exhibition, held in Albuquerque, NM, at the African American Performing Arts Center.

Part of her "Drips and Drought" series, "Dreaming of a Good Drenching" was juried into the 2017 Beacon Art Show "Windows to the Soul!"