

## Tessa Greene O'Brien

Tessa O'Brien was raised in a family of storytellers, a penchant she attributes to her Irish heritage. And her parents made their life in the rural midcoast community of St. George into "the first creative project they did together," O'Brien says. The family kept goats, chickens, and lambs. She spent a lot of her childhood roaming around. "I could follow a lamb all day," she says. "Which I did sometimes."

O'Brien's mother would occasionally roam with her. "We spent so much time having these great adventures," she says. While wandering the woods, her mother would spin yarns that imbued the world around them with a sense of mystery, wonder, and excitement. When O'Brien was seven, her mother died. The folklore she found in the land came to feel all the more haunted. "A recurring theme in my work is the stories that a place holds and the way that humans have interacted with the landscape," she says. "There are a lot of ghosts in my paintings, and there's a lot of love."

As both a painter and a curator—she has exhibited sculptors and video artists while organizing shows at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art and the Alice Gauvin Gallery—she appreciates the expansiveness of art, from big murals to Persian miniatures. A curiosity about what art can be—combined with an affinity for a good yarn—imbues her process in her South Portland studio. O'Brien collects various textiles, from sportswear to life preservers, and sews and stretches them to create her canvases. She then

sketches her compositions in bleach, washes the canvas again, and uses a batik technique to stain the canvas before sealing it and painting in oil. The result is a scene—usually a semi-abstracted landscape—layered atop impressions of what came before.

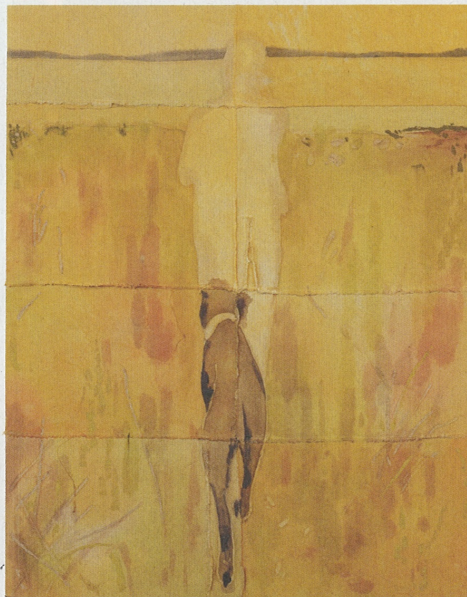
"I've been working on how to incorporate a narrative approach to the tradition of abstract painting, essentially marrying the two and figuring out how to use process, material, and color to convey atmosphere and a sense of time and place," she says.

Devon Zimmerman, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art, is a fan of how O'Brien's process makes each work into both painting and art object. Her feel for color and shape reminds Zimmerman of both the dreamy warmth of French impressionism and the brooding of Italian futurism. "The entire body of work is a painterly flex," he says. "She elevates the mundane of our daily rituals and finds beauty, agency, and meaning."

In a recent set of paintings, currently presented as *Poems from Here*, a solo gallery show in New York, figures dissolve into the landscape, meeting the world where their colors blend. "We share atoms with every human and living thing that's ever existed," O'Brien says. "There's an existential loneliness to modern life. People are disconnected. With technology and social media, it's hard to spend time in nature. That we are all connected to the earth and to each other is a big theme in my work."

For O'Brien, even just the act of painting can be a salve for that modern malady. "The best hack of being a painter is you can ask people if you can paint on their private property," she says. "It's opened a lot of doors for me." Her approach is more kosher than her father's—he is famously a trespasser, she says. "He raised me like, 'This land is your land. Swim first, ask permission later.'" —M.C.

> *Alexandre*, a New York gallery, is exhibiting *Poems from Here* until June 12.



LUKE EDER (AUGUST GARDEN); BORU O'BRIEN O'CONNELL (ZZY IN THE FIELD); TARA RICE (PORTRAIT, PAINT BRUSHES)

# ALEXANDRE



Top: *August Garden, Montpellier*, 2026, oil, bleach, wax resist on dyed and sewn canvas, 36 by 36 by 1½ inches. Bottom: *Izzy in the Field*, 2026, oil, bleach, wax resist on dyed and sewn canvas over panel, 60 by 48 by 1½ inches.