

ART

Irma Cerese

ON EXHIBIT AT EDGEWATER GALLERY ON THE GREEN, MIDDLEBURY

Painter Irma Cerese hopes for more reactions to her work like this one: "They make my mouth and eyes water with the beauty of the shapes and colors."

Cerese uses acrylic paints on square canvases. Her colors, whether muted or bold, are always richly laid. The landscape is gently blocked out into not-quite-defined shapes: hills and their

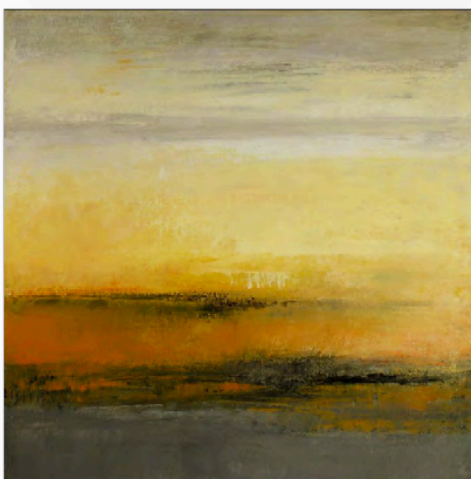
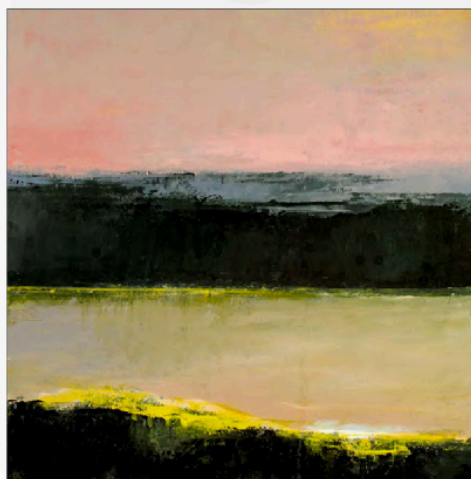
BY ISABEL
LOWER

shadows, bodies of water and reflections in them, shapes that are mountains, trees, and occasionally a rooftop. Serene scenes, painted from photographs taken across New England, that Cerese calls "a celebration of visual experience."

Cerese will be exhibiting nine new pieces at Edgewater Gallery at the Falls in November and December as part of the gallery's "7 Artists for Our 7th Birthday" show. "It was an easy decision to include Irma in our holiday small works show," said Edgewater's Kate Smith. "She's been with us from the very start as a part of Edgewater's original stable of artists when we opened in November of 2009. Irma has always enjoyed a strong base of collectors, and has remained a favorite, even as we've grown and expanded our offerings. We love Irma."

The nine pieces Cerese will show are all contained in canvases just 12-inches by 12-inches in size. "This gem-like collection of 12-inch, square paintings — gorgeous, evocative color impressions — range from semi- to mostly abstract landscapes," Smith said. "Their size and price point makes them perfect for those who've been wanting to start a collection. And in groupings of multiples, these paintings are a visual treat!"

Smaller is how Cerese prefers to work. After art school (In the 1960s, Cerese attended the Academy of Art in Chicago, where she grew up, and then the School of the Art Institute on a scholarship) she maintained a studio in New York until 1985. In her large loft space, Cerese said, her work "followed the custom of the times and I made paintings as large as I could carry — in the 54"x54" range. This was fine when I had a loft studio but many years later my circumstances changed and I started working in smaller format — 16"x16" or so."



Cadillac Mountain #9, #10 and #11 (top to bottom) — 12"x12" — \$425 each.

"I KNEW I HAD TO GET BACK TO IT WHEN PUTTING ON DIFFERENT COLORS OF EYESHADOW BECAME A HIGHLIGHT OF THE DAY."

— Irma Cerese

Now in her 80s, Cerese is still working on the small scale. Aside from the practical physical considerations," she said, "Working small allows me greater freedom to experiment in a number of ways — more abstract subject matter, more unusual color relationships. A failed 12"x12" or 6"x6" can be taken into stride more easily than a larger one."

That smaller pieces are more affordable is "an important point for me," Cerese said. (These small pieces are priced at \$425 a painting.) She doesn't shy away from discussing practical side of being a working artist. After school, she said, "I had to get a non-art job to earn money," which turned out to be in the health insurance industry. "Then we moved to New York City and I was able to quit that job for five years after my daughter was born and worked at painting when she was asleep. I was able to earn some money from my painting then, but had to return to outside work, still painting at night and weekends."

Cerese left painting for several years, but says, "I knew I had to get back to it when putting on different colors of eyeshadow became a highlight of the day." This was 1999. She was living in Massachusetts, and she had retired early. She began painting smaller scale works than before and said she exhibited work wherever she could. She entered local competitions and won awards, and eventually her work was being shown in galleries across New England, including Edgewater in Middlebury.

Cerese paints from photographs taken on family trips around New England. Her favorite landscapes, she said, are those that look like they would make a good painting, with elements like "dramatic lighting effects, peaceful views, seasonal colors, but not so much panoramic vistas. Some places just ask to be used as subject matter, repeatedly, such as nature preserves, which have been subject of dozens of paintings."

Of the new works she will be showing at Edgewater this month, there are three in Acadia, Maine, titled "Cadillac Mountain #9," "10," and "11." "#9" shows the first sunlight burning as a spray of lemon color across a black hilltop. "#10" the sun hasn't risen; instead the sky is a dark orange, a stand of

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

CERESE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

trees forefront of the muted, gray water of the bay is brushed in cranberry color. "#11" is at first glance much softer than the first two views of this iconic scene, however Cerese's rough, wide strokes of burnt orange over pale yellow, layered horizontally between scratched in black islands and a white-gray sky make the piece glow stronger the longer you gaze at it.

Other paintings in this group are across Vermont, which Cerese says "is such a beautiful place that it begs to be the inspiration for painting." "The Green Mountains #10" shows views we here have been enjoying this past month, a hillside lit up with fiery fall foliage.

You may have noticed Cerese's system for titling her works, named after the places where she took the photograph that would serve as "the model" for the painting. "However," Cerese said, "this is done merely for identifying the place and for avoiding titles that are descriptive." She uses a landscape "both as a point of connection and departure but I don't wish to tell a story, or

accurately describe the observed world. Instead, I convert the primary elements of what inspired me to take the photograph in the first place into an underlying loosely geometric structure. So I don't seek to inspire people viewing my work with this or that place; I aim to produce evocative work that is compelling in its own right."

"I DON'T WISH TO TELL A STORY, OR ACCURATELY DESCRIBE THE OBSERVED WORLD. INSTEAD, I CONVERT THE PRIMARY ELEMENTS OF WHAT INSPIRED ME."

— Irma Cerese

Cerese's work can be described as on a spectrum from abstract to representational. Of the new pieces, the most abstract is "Blue Hill Farm #6," which could be interpreted as a simple abstract color study, but her attention to value and easy but thoughtful vertical 'scribbles' tell us it's clearly a layered landscape. "Knight Pond #9" is somewhere in the middle. Smudging and blurring creates trees' reflection on the water and

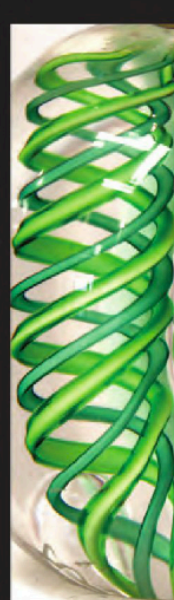
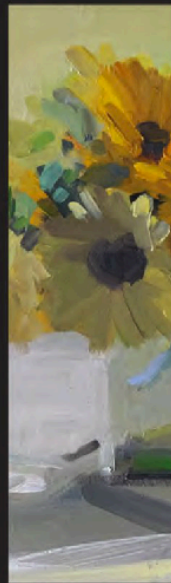
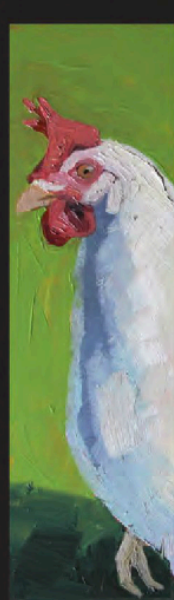
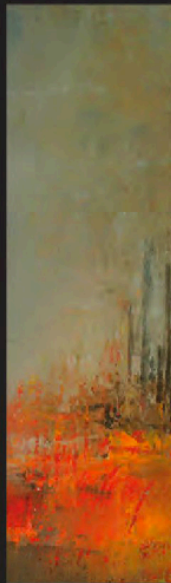
the impression of a canopy of leaves. "Boothbay Harbor #3," with its clearly defined trees and highlights indicating water is an example of her more representational work.

Regardless of where they fall on the spectrum of representational to abstract, Cerese's paintings have in common a focus on color relationships. Geometric planes of color provide structure, and texture created with brush and palette knife and brings the landscape to focus.

As with many abstract painters, Cerese's work is not about recreating an image, but rather a combination of evoking the atmosphere of a place with the visceral, tactile process of painting. "One of my greatest pleasures in life," Cerese said, "is manipulating paint on a surface, and has been since childhood. There are always new ways to do that manipulation, even though the changes may be incremental and subtle."

Cerese is very conscious of the way her palette has shifted over her career. "Originally, I wanted to reproduce the color effects as photographed; nowadays I am far more likely to use colors from a source outside of the model photo."

When asked what she still finds new in painting, Cerese said: "A response from a viewer like the one I quoted earlier makes each painting feel like a new beginning."



7 ARTISTS FOR OUR 7TH BIRTHDAY

a small works show featuring Sara Katz, Patty Sgrecci, Irma Cerese, Hannah Sessions, Amy Brnger, Michael Egan, and CJ Hockett

EDGEWATER GALLERY at the falls | one mill street | edgewatergallery-vt.com