

Margaret Ezekiel

b.1951, Djakarta, Indonesia, lives in
Waimea, Kaua'i
exhibited in *Biennial IV*

Awakening, 2010

charcoal on paper

MARGARET EZEKIEL

*Born 1951 in Djakarta, Indonesia
Lives in Waimea on Kaua'i*

Margaret Ezekiel's career as a visual artist began in a compromise between her desire to pursue dance and the wish of her father, who was a concert violinist and preferred that his children not be performing artists, that she become a doctor. Ezekiel's family—Dutch father, Dutch-Indonesian mother and two children—fled Indonesia during the political unrest of 1954 and settled in the Netherlands. Disenchanted with performing life in Europe, in 1961 Ezekiel's father moved the family to the United States, spending less than a year in Watertown, Massachusetts before settling in 1962 in Westchester in southern California.

Encouraged by her mother, Ezekiel began drawing at an early age. She continued through her school years to study art and dance whenever possible, but the emphasis in her education was on science and preparing for the career in medicine her father hoped for her. However, by Ezekiel's senior year in high school she knew she would not be happy working in a medical profession. Since it was too late for her to establish herself in dance, Ezekiel pursued her other love, painting and drawing, enrolling in Santa Monica Junior College and later transferring to the University of California, Long Beach, from which she received her bachelor of fine arts degree in 1976.

In 1977 Ezekiel and her husband visited Kaua'i on vacation, and two years later when a job opportunity came up they decided to move from California to Waimea on the west side of the island. Ezekiel, who primarily painted and drew the human figure, was impressed by the dramatic forms, intense colors, and subtle qualities of light she found in nature, and the Kaua'i landscape became a new subject for her to explore. One day in 1982 she encountered an artist working on the side of the road who was using pastels to depict the scene in front of him. Ezekiel had only used pastel to accent her drawings, but now she became intrigued to focus on the material by itself and investigate a new technique. Ezekiel's "discovery" of pastel happened at an opportune time, for she had been losing interest in painting in oils, had tried painting in egg tempera but found it too stiff, and was ready for something to rekindle her inspiration and enthusiasm. Although her initial attempts using pastel felt awkward, gradually Ezekiel came to appreciate its unique characteristics and expressive potential.

Pastel is a kind of hybrid of painting and drawing, combining aspects of both. It has the range of color and vibrancy of

oils without the necessity of waiting for pigments to dry between applications. Because pastel is dry, powdery pure pigment in stick form and is applied with graphic strokes, it conveys the softness and immediacy of touch characteristic of drawing. Ezekiel responded to pastel's ability to create a broad range of effects from a clear, strong line to loose and painterly veils of color. She especially liked the medium's tactile qualities—with pastel she could put down a line of pigment and then work it with her fingertips. Through the spontaneous additive mixing or blending of colors directly on the paper with her hands, she could achieve subtle, radiant coloristic effects and rich, velvety textures.

Working exclusively in pastel for over sixteen years, Ezekiel has developed her own way of working with the medium. Ezekiel is essentially self-taught, learning to use pastels through experimentation, by trial and error, although she also studied the pastels of Edgar Degas, Mary Cassatt, and Odilon Redon, three of the great masters of the medium. Having tried a number of white and colored papers, Ezekiel now only works on a medium to dark blue paper similar in tone to faded denim. She begins by quickly sketching in her subject with Prussian blue pigment, then wipes it down with her hands, leav-

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EZEKIEL (continued)

ing only the darkest areas as a guide to draw the subject in again with more detail. She may repeat this process of laying in and wiping down several times until she achieves a clear composition defined in terms of light and dark values. Ezekiel then begins to apply colors, working from the darks to the lights, from background to foreground, which gives her works their remarkable depth and luminosity. Gradually she builds the image with layer upon layer of pigment, blending and smoothing colors with her fingers. Finally she puts on the lightest elements (for which she rarely uses white, preferring the palest yellows and blues), letting the strokes remain distinct and untouched to define small details and give texture to the surface. Despite the apparent ease with which pastel can be applied and manipulated, it is a difficult and delicate medium. Because pastel is crumbly and does not form a continuous, cohesive film like oils, building up layers of pigment, mixing colors and rendering transparent effects requires a deft, light touch so as to not cause pigments to flake off or be pushed aside. Ezekiel's works, with their painstakingly modulated surfaces, show her to be equal to the demands of the medium.

Ezekiel works on her pastels in the studio at night. She once stated, "The night is my time, the night and what it holds visually and emotionally for me." Sitting on her lanai in the darkness and

taking her dog for late walks, Ezekiel was surprised to discover how much color she found in the nighttime landscape, and she began to draw what she saw from memory, sometimes using photographs as visual guides but returning often to a site to make mental and written notes about colors and the light. In 1987 she embarked on the series of "night visions," quiet nocturnal scenes with subtly nuanced shadows punctuated by brilliant sources of light—the stars, moon, headlights of a car, streetlights, lighted windows—and infused with an alluring sense of mystery and the unknown. The mood of quiet detachment and meditative aloneness with which she imbued her night pieces was a reflection of her own feelings at the time and a metaphor for human relationships in general. Of these works, Ezekiel has said, "I recognized my own loneliness and how much this feeling is part of our human condition. We deny our connectedness to one another and the whole universe. In my drawings I try to alleviate the illusion of separateness."

Over the last decade Ezekiel has continued to explore the expressive possibilities of the nighttime landscape—from the half-lights of dusk to the deepest darks of night—as a metaphor for human existence. In a series of small square-format pastels exhibited in 1997 with the title *12 Journeys, Roads and Clouds*, the curves of roads partially visible in the landscape evoke the opportunities with which we are presented and

the implications of choices made along life's journey. In these works Ezekiel also began to introduce a richer palette of colors and emphasize cloud- and light-filled skies, elements which she has continued to develop in her most recent works shown in this exhibition. In a departure from her earlier intimate format, however, Ezekiel has challenged herself to work substantially larger, using multiple sheets of paper to create diptychs and triptychs in emphatically horizontal and vertical compositions. Ezekiel's new landscapes envelop and embrace the viewer, drawing one into the space of the work and conveying a sense of our place in the enormity of nature and in life. In these images Ezekiel focuses on the period at the end of the day, the post-sunset twilight when the sky still holds onto the vestiges of daylight while the land is already darkening with the shadows of night. The skies predominate, filling half or more of the pictorial space, and allow Ezekiel an opportunity to work abstractly in a literal way, while trying to capture and fix a moment of something that is fleeting, intangible, and always changing. Standing in front of these works, the viewer has a sense of remaining physically connected to the land at the bottom of the picture, while the heart and mind are drawn upward and allowed to soar in the ethereal realm that often serves as a symbol for hopes and dreams, providing a feeling of spiritual communion and release.