



**Krista Townsend**

Immersion



Above: *Red Wildflowers*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

Cover: Detail of *Wildflowers Up Close*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches

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Essay by **Sarah Sargent**




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**Immersion**  
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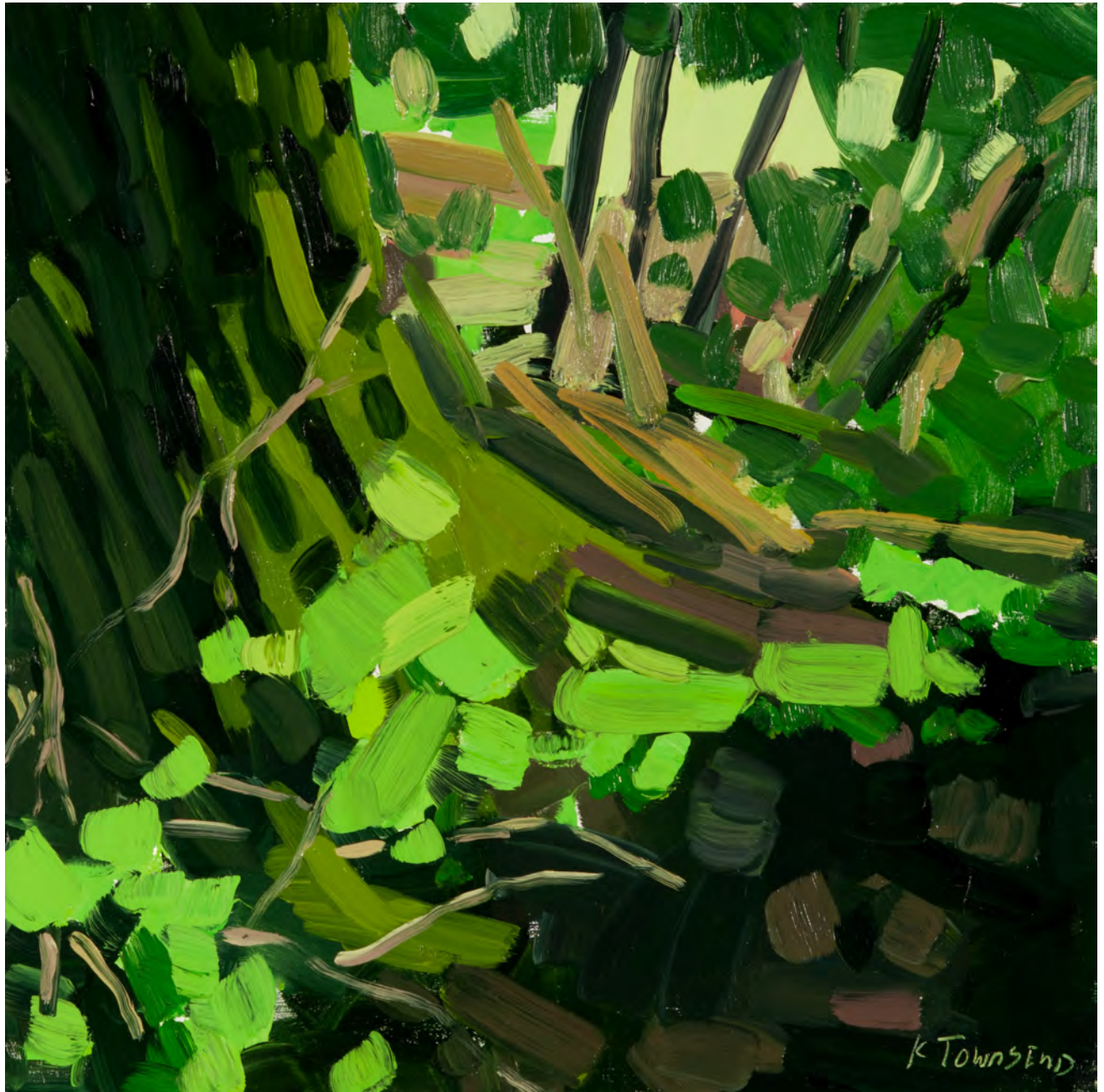
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Looking at Krista Townsend's work, you would be surprised to learn that she trained as a medical illustrator. It is a rigorous course of study that combines advanced biology and anatomy courses with classical studio art training. Observation, dispassion and accuracy are required. This all seems a far cry from her exuberant and free visual paeans to nature. Learning about her process and looking closer at the work, you begin to see that the connection between the two is actually quite strong.

Every day, rain or shine, Townsend hikes with her dog in the woods outside Charlottesville. She goes to the same area day after day, observing her surroundings and experiencing nature—the sights, smells, sounds, weather, etc. These repetitive excursions, which suggest a kind of meditation, ensure a deep connection to her subject matter and become the inspiration for the work she produces in the studio. “I immerse myself in the landscape. I want to capture that experience of nature and offer it to the viewer,” says Townsend. She takes photos on the trail, but these function purely as compositional tools; she relies on her memory to provide the rest of the information.

Already a keen observer, thanks to her science and art backgrounds, Townsend has augmented this skill through the repetitive regimen she follows. She's become particularly attuned to the natural world and portrays it with depth and sensitivity. Her work is not just a visual representation of nature, but an authentic account of the experience of interacting with it. This kind of attention to observation and the desire to convey a truth to the viewer is very much akin to the process and aims of medical illustration. But the way her paintings look couldn't be more different from the doctrinaire approach of those scientific renderings. With her highly keyed colors, slashing line and gestural brushstrokes, Townsend's works convey a joy, not just in nature, but in the act of painting itself—you can tell she revels in it.



*Moss and Sticks*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 16 x 16 inches



The works pulse with energy and Townsend's process is very physical, her great arching strokes suggest the arc of her arm applying paint. Townsend is constantly moving as she paints—stepping back to regard the canvas, crouching down to work on the bottom, standing up again to reach an upper corner. A large mirror hangs on one wall of her studio, maybe 15 feet away from her easel. She is continuously checking it to see how her work reads from a distance.

Some of her paintings, *Moss and Sticks*, for example, are like deconstructed landscapes with the rectangular daubs of paint she favors, at once fracturing and building up the composition, while others like *Broken Tree*, verge into the abstract. While Townsend is painting from nature, she leads with the formal elements, not the narrative ones. She's not interested in recreating an exact replica of what is there, but rather the more intangible experience of being in that place.

Space is suggested, but Townsend's paintings have a distinct flatness. She wants you paying attention to what she's doing on the surface, not distracted by the visual sleight of hand of perspective. *Yellow Leaves*, with a close-up of the leaves of the title positioned against meadow, mountains and sky, presents the sense of distance, but without the illusion of depth. In a work

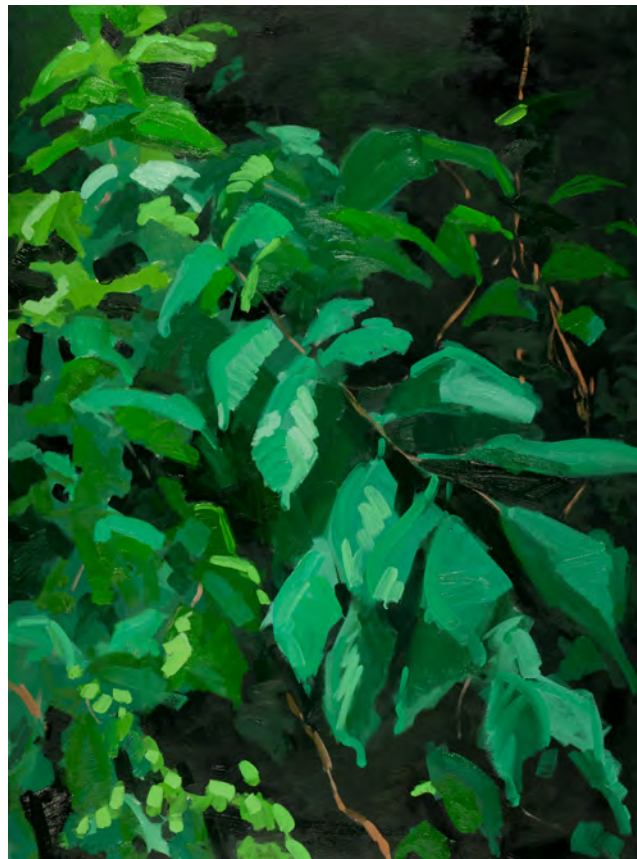
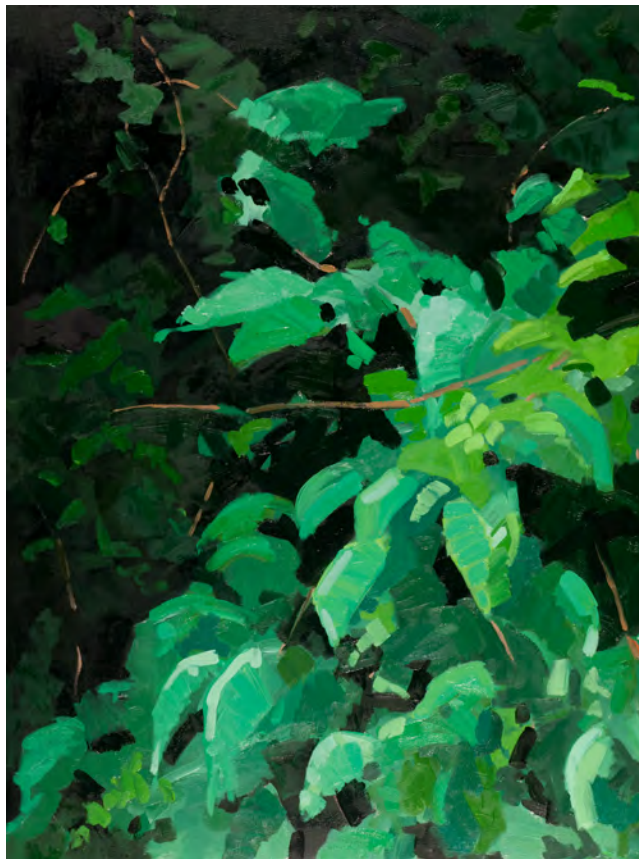


*Yellow Leaves*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



*Evening Woods*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches





like *Evening Woods*, Townsend creates a lively dialogue between foreground and background using light and shadow. While this piece is quite abstract, the way she conveys the quality of light glimpsed through leaves, is spot on. *Vines* is a diptych of almost impossibly green leaves set against a dark background. The green works because it evokes bright sun on leaves. You can almost feel it, or recall how it feels, and smell the mineral tang of the loamy soil. It is a painting of fecundity and captures that distinctly Virginia summertime when kudzu consumes anything in its path and other plants run riot in the hothouse heat.



Townsend supplements her woodland rambles with visits to a friend's wildflower garden. The paintings inspired by it, *Luna's Meadow*, *Yellow Echinacea Meadow*, *Wildflower Meadow*, are more than just pretty pictures. Townsend is after a more holistic rendition of what it's like to be in that garden. To get there, she opts for unconventional compositions and an unsentimental approach, which add both interest and substance to the work. "These paintings are kind of messy—they're going off in all directions—because that's what the landscape is doing," she says. "Drawing has always been pretty easy for me and it has certainly been a focus of my training. What I love about these paintings is that they push me beyond that. I get a little lost in the abstract shapes, but then step back and see how it all comes together."

Above: *Wildflower Meadow III (Before Trees)*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

Opposite: *Luna's Meadow*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches





Top, left to right: *Yellow Echinacea Meadow*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches and *White Daisies*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches  
Bottom, left to right: *Yellow Echinacea*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches and *Flowers in Shadow*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 inches



In her large, individual flowers, she zeros in on one component of the landscape, using scale and brushstroke to temper their prettiness. "When I was young, this was a challenge for me because I like the things everybody else likes and I wanted to paint those things, but now I want to paint differently. I don't want to paint just a pretty picture. This is what my college professors were trying to push, but I guess back then I wasn't ready for the message."

*Wildflowers Up Close*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



Townsend says she's affected by the weather, so what's going on outside shows up in the studio. She admits that winter is hard for her because she loves colors so much. Yet, the earthy tonalities and dynamic brushstrokes of *Copper Beech in the Rain* and *Broken Tree* show how adept she is at painting more subdued "rainy day" works.

When she's stuck, Townsend will turn the painting to the wall and it "will paint itself", meaning the next time she looks at it, she either decides she likes it after all, or she can now see what needs to be done to fix it. Such a painting is *Hiding Place*, an immensely satisfying work which features a beautifully painted tangle of grasses that is both bravura abstract composition and mysterious nest-like form. Neon green dots and cerulean slashes add dazzle to the olives and ochres. There is such command and restraint in this work, it's startling.

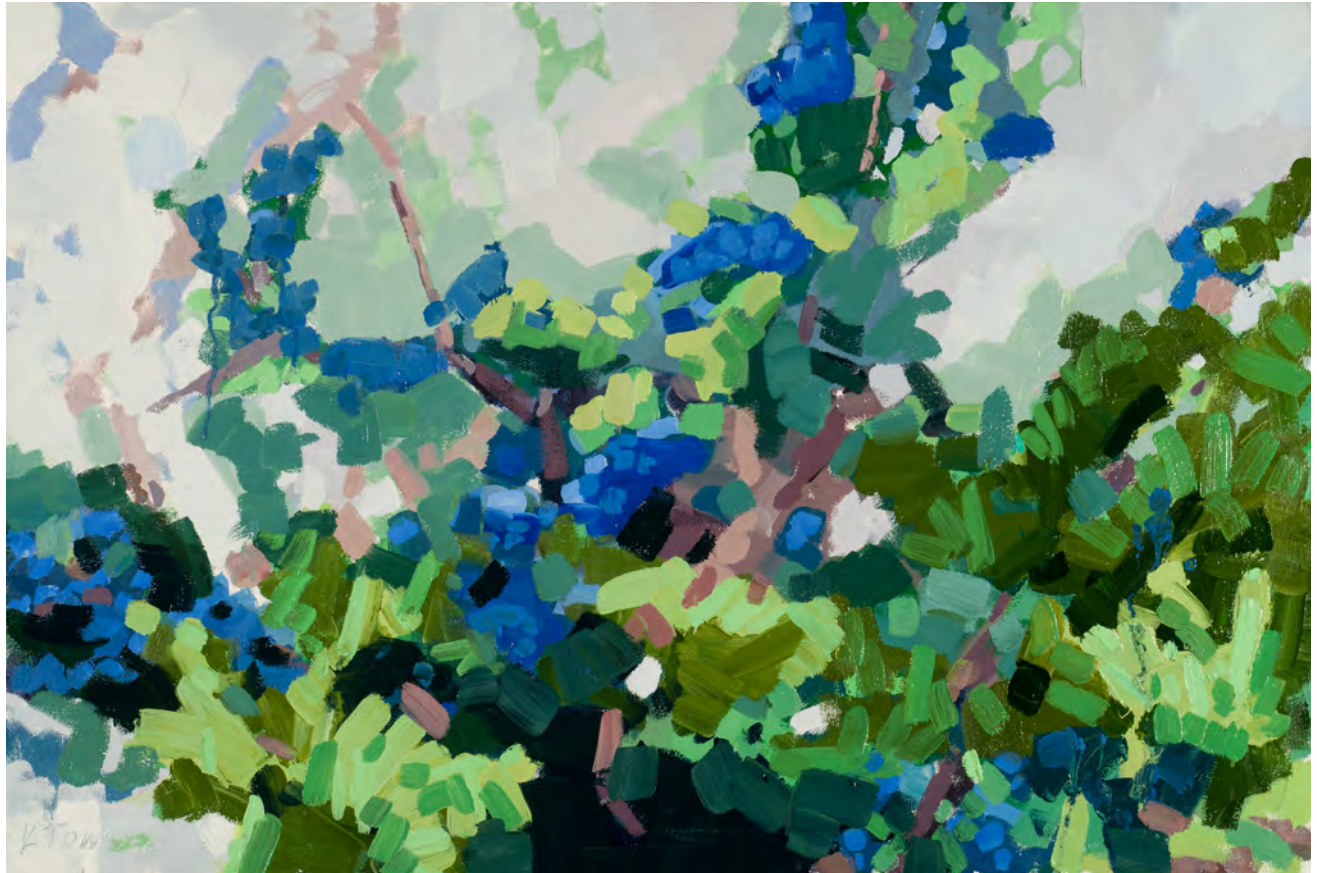
Above, left to right: *Wildflowers After Bloom*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches and *Spring Moss*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches  
Opposite: *Copper Beech in the Rain*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches





*Hiding Place*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches





Among the many qualities Townsend's work possesses, the most prominent is confidence. This is evident in the risks Townsend takes. She's able to take them because she herself possesses confidence, a result of her exacting training. She's got the artistic chops backing her up as she pushes herself to explore the far reaches of painting. One looks forward to seeing where she goes and whether it will take her to abstraction, or bring her back to the figure, a subject she has thus far avoided painting because of her training. In any case, based on this body of work, you know the future will be bright for Townsend whatever direction she follows. ■



*Wildflower Meadow (with Horizon)*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

*Wildflowers and Rocks*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches



**Sarah Sargent** writes about contemporary art for *Artillery* (“Killer Text on Art”) magazine based in Los Angeles, *Virginia Living* magazine and *C-Ville Weekly*. Raised in New York City, Sargent received her BA from Wellesley College in Art History and her MA in Art History from Columbia University. After working for several art galleries in New York, Sargent headed up Second Street Gallery, a nonprofit contemporary art space in Charlottesville known to feature outstanding emerging artists from around the country. While there, she curated over 50 exhibitions including several large scale site-specific installations. An avid collector of contemporary art, Sargent lives in the Charlottesville area; her blog is [artnosh.blogspot.com](http://artnosh.blogspot.com)

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*Wildflower Meadow (Immersion)*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches



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