

## ON THE COVER

*Comme un Oiseau sur la Branche* [Like a Bird on the Branch]  
by Victoria Stagni

*The following is based on a written exchange with the artist received on July 10, 2024.*

What is a young woman doing perched on a branch with an array of multicolored birds? According to our cover artist, the painting is meant to have a dreamlike quality. If the woman is among birds, perhaps she might fly off with them. After all, dreams have few limits. As for the vibrant colors, this is an attribute of birds that she admires and loves to paint. But why are they almost the same size as the human? Because size correlates with importance in visual art and always has. We are all just members of the animal kingdom, none are preeminent.

Victoria Stagni was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and has also lived in France and the United States. Her parents were both architects, and drawing and sculpting, creating forms from the imagination, and then making them real were part of life at home. That is not to say, however, that she was encouraged to pursue visual art as a career. Her parents did their best to steer her away from this financially challenging path. She is glad not to have followed their advice.

Stagni studied at the Atelier des Beaux Arts in Bordeaux, France, and became passionate about painting with oils, now her preferred medium. She enjoys the feel and texture of the pigment under her brush and on canvas. Acrylic paints dry too rapidly and she finds their colors “garish.” Major influences on her development include Henri Rousseau, a self-taught painter, often described as a “naïve” or “primitive” artist. She likes his images of animals looking out at the viewer from overgrown vegetation or juxtaposed oddly with humans. The word “dreamlike” again comes to mind, and she mentions it herself. Frida Kahlo is another favorite, especially her self-portraits with animals. It is the way Kahlo looks straight out at the viewer, free and powerful, affirming her Mexican identity, that Stagni finds appealing. She also likes Gustav Klimt for his portrayal of women. They are depicted as simultaneously dignified and desirable, expressing what she calls the “eternal feminine.” Among the modernists David Hockney is valued for his use of color and the atmosphere of strangeness that surrounds the characters in his images. Banksy’s street art, with its political and social themes, is yet another touchstone.

These choices imply that Stagni largely eschews pure abstraction in favor of depicting nature, including animals and people. She rarely “feels something” when faced with form and color devoid of representation.

Asked whether she has a philosophy of art, Stagni replies that it is a difficult question. Her goal is to paint what she finds beautiful and intriguing. The everyday world imposes itself on our lives in ways that are often ugly, boring, and pointless. Experiencing art, from her perspective, is an emotional event, and she refuses to accept any constraints on her freedom of expression. The recurring influence of dreams is partly a legacy of the Latin American Magic Realist authors that she read as a child. Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Mario Vargas Llosa played creatively with time, history, and politics. They broke down the boundaries between fantasy and reality, stepping back and forth between them. In addition, Stagni feels that people have become alienated from nature, and hence some of her paintings are “pleas for preserving instead of destroying the environment.” This is not to say that human subject matter is of less interest. Her portraits tend to be of women because they inspire her and she likes to paint their faces, bodies, and clothes. Native Americans are another important source of imagery. She often includes an element of fear, unease, or threat in her art to dampen the joy that vivid color can produce. At other times she strives to create a universe more colorful than anything that actually exists. Adding a touch of the naïve, a childlike simplicity, to this universe helps evoke the sense of being in a daydream that she seeks. Our cover image again comes to mind.

Were there were any life events that motivated her to choose visual art as a career? Stagni mentions moving from Paris to Bordeaux 12 years ago. In checking out her new home, she found a painter’s easel in a closet, left behind by the previous occupant. It reminded her of the pleasure she had always taken in picture-making. Pursuing an art career seemed impossible, but finding the easel was a signal to take the chance.

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