



LEANNE VENIER

“Resurgence”

# Full spectrum

## Alumna's path balances concrete and abstract

by Robyn Ross

It's a rare gray day in Central Texas, but the walls of Leanne Venier's gallery in South Austin are radiant with the rich colors of her art.

“**I**nto the Depths” glows a deep shade of garnet. Brushstrokes of cobalt and indigo in “Ageless, Boundless, Timeless” suggest the undulation of seagrass.

The center of “Duration” is belted with a thick cream-colored line dividing the eggplant hue above it from the burgundy below. Venier thinks she may have painted the line, vaguely reminiscent of a horizon, because she likes landscape photography. But it might also be a visual depiction of the conscious and unconscious mind. She points to the lower half.

“There’s so much that goes on in our unconscious minds that we’re not aware of. And a lot of the time it’s calm on the surface, and all the interesting activity is happening below.” She relies on all this “interesting activity” to create her abstract oil paintings.

The white band itself might have emerged from the unconscious mind; Venier painted it one day without thinking. She liked the effect and kept it. “If I’m liking what’s happening on the canvas, and then something unplanned happens, I don’t go back in and erase,” she explains. “I just say, OK, I’ll go in this direction, then.”

It’s an outlook that also characterizes Venier’s professional life. Trained as an engineer at Michigan Tech, she’s worked in fields that might seem disconnected, from engineering to art. Yet as in her paintings, each new vocation has built on the previous layer.

The way she learned to think at Michigan Tech has informed them all.

“Michigan Tech was all about teaching critical thinking, so you not only had to learn information,

you had to really understand it,” she remembers. “On tests, you’d get off-the-wall problems that were not in any textbook and hadn’t been brought up in class, and you’d have to figure out how to solve the problem.

“Basically, we were taught how to teach ourselves.” It was a skill that would prove useful many times.

After earning a BS in Mechanical Engineering in 1987, she worked in San Diego, California, on Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicles, small submarines that rescue people from disabled full-size subs. After her group was laid off, she helped out in a friend’s catering business and then moved to Florence, Italy, where she taught English and investigated alternative healing—particularly herbology and Chinese medicine. “I was very interested in the root cause of illness, not just resolving the symptoms but understanding what was going on at a psycho-emotional level,” she explains.

She returned to the US and took her first painting class, in 2003. Her teacher, artist Phillip Wade, has watched her work evolve ever since. “Leanne knew what she wanted to paint from the very start,” he remembers. “The much larger work I saw at her new space in South Austin is far better but not much different in theme from what she was doing then.”

After that first class, Venier earned a master’s in oriental medicine and opened a practice, treating cancer patients through the use of shiatsu and acupuncture with an emphasis on color healing.

In 2006, she enrolled in a second art class and began to develop her style in earnest. Almost immediately, her work began to sell. She was a finalist for the Hunting Art Prize, a Houston-based



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LEANNE VENIER

*"Into the Depths" You can see more of Leanne Venier's paintings at [leannevenier.com](http://leannevenier.com)*

competition with a \$50,000 purse. Galleries called, offering to show her paintings.

A curator for local restaurants placed Venier's work in a café in Austin's Hyde Park neighborhood. The paintings had been up for a few weeks when she received a surprising call: two of her 16-by-20-inch canvases, each worth several hundred dollars, were stolen during business hours.

Venier kept calm. The thief had left the frames. And in a way, it was a compliment that someone liked her work enough to risk going to jail for it.

Then, another painting was stolen. "Presumably it was the same woman who stole the first two, and she wanted to add to her collection," Venier laughs. The woman had strode purposefully into the deli with a garbage bag, stood on a booth to reach for the painting, almost dropped it on an astonished patron, stuffed the painting into the bag, and left.

"I realized, OK, the universe is telling me something," Venier remembers. She whipped up a press release, titling it "Hyde Park Art Thief Strikes Again." Local television stations and newspapers picked up the story. Then David Stein, a prominent area patron of the arts, bought several of Venier's pieces for his own collection and offered to show her work in his gallery. "She's wonderful, an up-and-coming artist, and very popular in Austin," he says.

At every show, guests would say they were drawn to paintings in one particular color. The blues were always "calming," the reds "energizing."

Over time, Venier noticed that one color—not always the same one—prevailed. "People always want to tell me what their favorite pieces are, so I

get this sense of collective consciousness," she says. She speculates that world affairs affect people's emotions on an aggregate level, accounting for the appeal of certain colors at particular times. Early in 2010 people were favoring her works in teal, but by the end of the year, the preferences changed to red. "I feel like everybody's a lot more optimistic about the state of the economy," she says. "It makes sense that they'd be drawn to red, because it's a catalyzing color, and it gives you that courage and self-confidence to move forward."

To better understand this phenomenon, she is researching color therapy in Western medicine. Guests in her gallery can read a poster listing such practices as the use of blue light to treat jaundice in infants and full-spectrum light therapy to treat seasonal affective disorder.

She's not the only one seeking to connect these two worlds: staff at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio asked her to show her work at the school this spring; the exhibit runs through June 30.

To Penelope Borchers, the special collections librarian who coordinates the exhibits, Venier's biography is as compelling as her art.

"I was really impressed with her work, and when I looked into her background and saw that she'd been in engineering, I saw that she herself is in balance," Borchers says.

"That balance of the concrete and abstract is very appropriate for our environment at the medical school. It's a balance of science and art—and we can all use more balance in our lives." ■