

Art and Nature,

Trudy Kraft expresses her love of art and the natural world in complex, multilayered paintings. | **by Lynne Moss Perricelli**

Symbol and Pattern

Akbar's Folio No. 2

2006, watercolor and gouache, 13¼ x 9½. All artwork this article courtesy Gross McCleef Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, unless otherwise indicated.



Looking at Trudy Kraft's paintings

brings forth a variety of associations, ranging from quilts to kimonos to ancient symbols. Indeed the artist calls upon an array of influences—from the natural elements around her to the traditional art forms of Japan to the art she studies in museums. Synthesizing all these visual ideas, Kraft uses symbol and pattern to express a “deep intuitive feeling” that forms a mental image, one that she can explore and continue to reveal in a series of paintings.

Employing both an additive and a reductive process, Kraft combines watermedia and masking fluid in multiple layers, with one work leading to the next. “Working in a series creates a remarkable, inexplicable dialogue with the paintings,” she says. “With each one I see more and understand more deeply.” Experimenting with color, tone, texture, and space, Kraft gradually realizes her ideas and feelings in the making of the painting.

Every discussion of Kraft's work leads in some way to the influence of the extended periods she spent in Kyoto, Japan, in the 1980s, where her husband was writing a doctoral dissertation on a Zen master of the 14th century. Here she studied the tea ceremony, visited temples and museums, enjoyed Kabuki theater, and became fascinated with traditional textile designs—encounters that had a profound and lasting effect on Kraft's artistic sensibility. As is evident in her work today, she was especially impressed with the textile designs and their fusing of nature and pattern, notably the techniques of Bingata and Tsujigahana, both resist-based. She also studied sumi-e painting and began to see how working

in this technique helped her retain and pursue a visual idea. “I loved the idea of filling up a brush and letting it run dry, making a variety of markings,” she adds.

The artist's ideas for her paintings—all of which stem from her reverence for nature and art—originate from her huge store of images, in her mind and in her notebooks.

For the past 35 years or so she has kept notebooks of all kinds in which she has made drawings of anything that interests her, but especially of plants, insects, and artwork she has come across in museums around the world, such as Islamic art, Korean pottery, or Aboriginal paintings. “Lately I've been very interested in folk art, and I've taken a lot from that, especially in my botanical paintings,” she adds. “All these different arts are infinitely inspiring.” She looks through these notebooks on a regular basis, continually rediscovering the material. Recently she came across botanical drawings that she traced onto a piece of Mylar and cut out to make a stencil, for instance. “Some of them are sumi-e irises or butterflies, drawings from my own garden or a museum,” she explains.

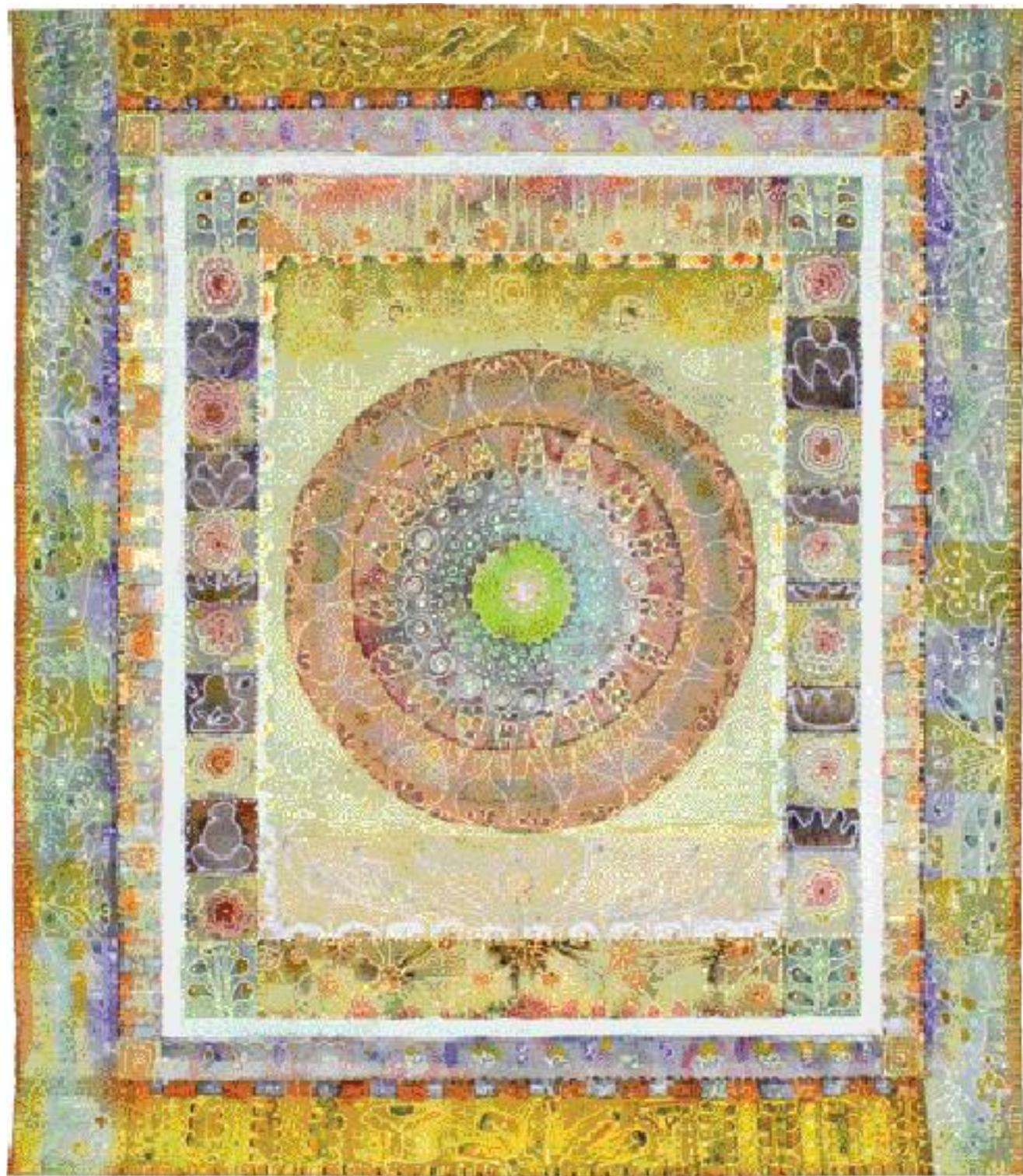
The first stage of Kraft's process is to work out her concept. “I get a mental image,” she describes. “My mind's eye shows me things. Not that the images turn out like that, but my mind's eye works on the problem, on the idea, so it's a combination of an idea and a feeling, and the color will describe it.” The idea changes over time, evolving into a visual concept through a series of small sketches and paintings. “I work



BELOW
Akbar's Folio No. 6
2007, watercolor and gouache on Nepalese paper, 12½ x 9.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Along the Mora
2007, watercolor, gouache, and masking fluid, 51 x 30.





ABOVE
Terma Zone No. 07
 2007, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 30 x 25.
 Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Terma Zone No. 20
 2008, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 32 x 64.

ONLINE GALLERY
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“My mind’s eye shows me things. Not that the images turn out like that, but my mind’s eye works on the problem, on the idea, so it’s a combination of an idea and a feeling, and the color will describe it.”

up the idea in drawings, large and small, so that I can see if there are problems and make changes,” she says.

The artist then cuts the paper. Working from large rolls of Arches 156-lb paper, she cuts the paper into the desired dimensions—which vary widely but are typically quite large—and then selects her palette. She weights down the paper and wets the surface so the paper will lay flat. She then makes marks to establish the space and applies the first layer of watercolor. Referring to her earlier drawings and paintings, she uses free, broad strokes to lay in the initial colors and design. Once this dries, she applies the first layer of masking fluid. “This protects the initial color,” she says, “and sets up the structure. It’s the bones of the painting.” Next, she adds multiple layers of watercolor on top, building up the imagery, and when those layers are dry, she applies more masking fluid. Throughout the process she works intuitively, responding to the interaction of color and composition. When she is finished layering, she uses a rubber eraser to remove the masking fluid, revealing the underlying layers.

“When I first started using masking fluid 20 years ago, I used brushes to apply it,” Kraft explains. “Then I used eye droppers, turkey basters, medicine droppers. Now I often use a Masquepen, in which the masking fluid comes out in a fine, continuous line.” At times Kraft uses a range of blacks, grays, and sepias to unify the surface before removing the

Kraft’s Materials

PALETTE

- a variety of watercolor paints in tubes from Schmincke, Winsor & Newton, Holbein, Turner, and Daniel Smith
- Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache or Schmincke gouache

MASKING FLUID

- Incredible White Mask
- Masquepen

BRUSHES

- a variety of brushes, including hakes, horse-hair, and sumi-e
- Utrecht Sablette wash
- Princeton shader
- Pentel brush pen

SURFACE

- Arches 156-lb paper in rolls, cut to the desired dimensions

OTHER

- spray bottles
- porcelain and enamel bowls
- terry-cloth towels



LEFT
Terma Zone No. 17
 2007, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 51 x 40.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Terma Zone No. 15
 2007, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 22 x 16½.

masking fluid. Other times she applies gouache on top of the final layers to “augment and adorn certain areas, to bring them out,” she says. In all, the process slowly refines the imagery. With the application of controlled patterning, the image becomes more detailed as the work develops.

Kraft employs as many different techniques as necessary for the effects she desires, including wet-on-dry, wet-in-wet, and drybrush. She takes advantage of bloom wherever it occurs and uses the masking to direct the paint flow and make tonal changes. “The paint pulls around the masking and creates space,” she describes. “I flood the surface with color and water, creating more patterns.” To remove water-

color, she uses a sponge or a rag. “I have been experimenting with water-based paints and have developed a variety of techniques,” she says, adding that she appreciates the spontaneous nature of the medium.

Kraft, in fact, thrives on the experimental aspects of her approach, and she seeks to balance setting up a structure with following the “personality and intelligence” of the watercolor medium. “The older I get and the more experienced, the more aware I am of the possible ways of solving painting problems. It would not be interesting to paint if it were all prescribed. Watercolor is difficult, but it depends on how you approach it. For me, when something isn’t



BELOW

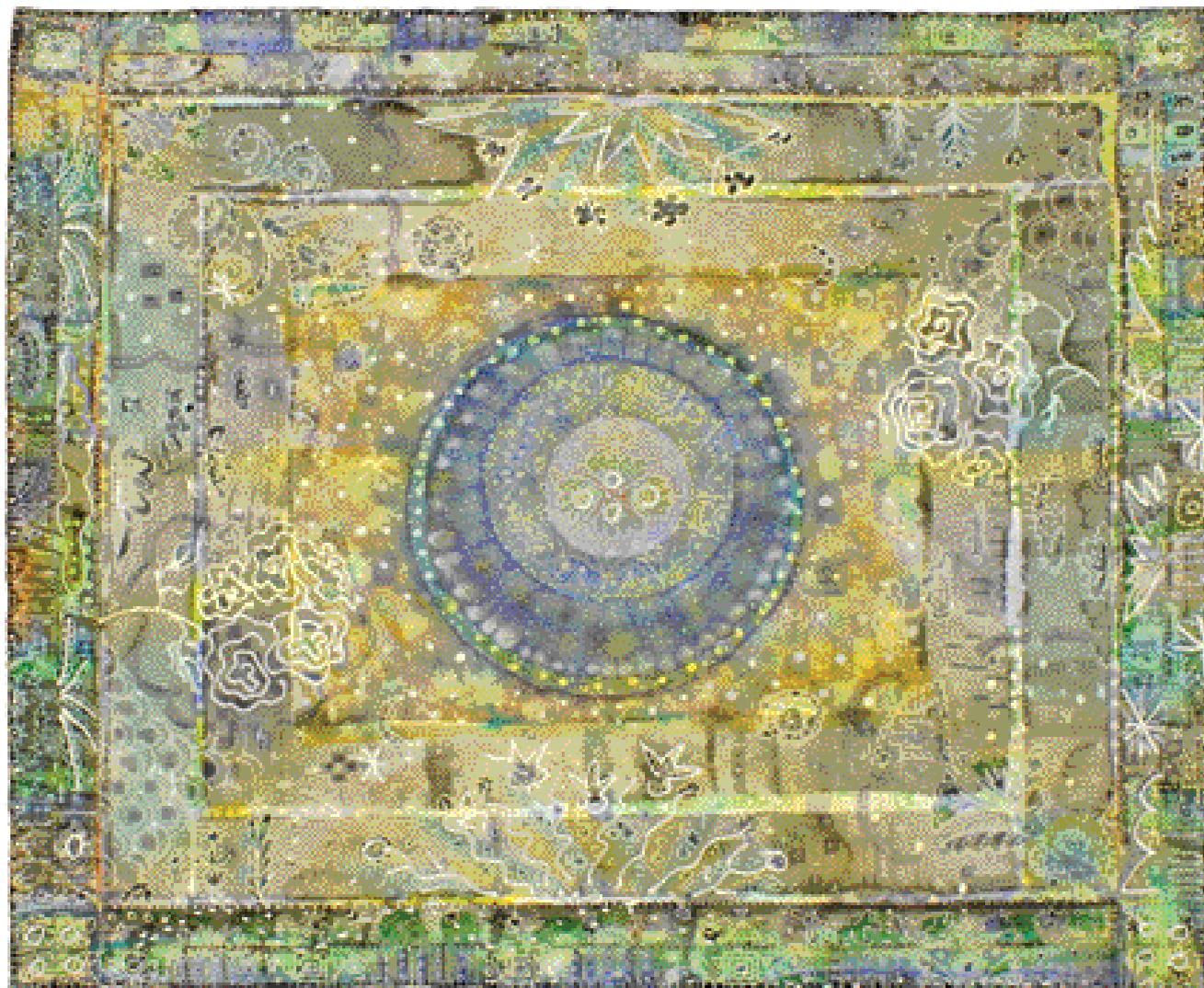
Terma Zone No. 04

2007, watercolor and masking fluid, 25 x 30.

working, I put it aside for a while.”

Although Kraft uses Arches paper primarily, she has also experimented with Twinrocker and a few varieties of hand-made papers. For paints, she favors Schmincke, Winsor & Newton, Holbein, Turner, and Daniel Smith; for gouache she uses Schmincke or Winsor & Newton. She organizes her tubes of paint in several baskets according to cool and warm colors; she keeps the watercolors and gouache separate. Her brushes are made by a variety of manufacturers and include a number of Japanese brushes and sponge brushes. Other tools include spray bottles and an array of kitchen implements.

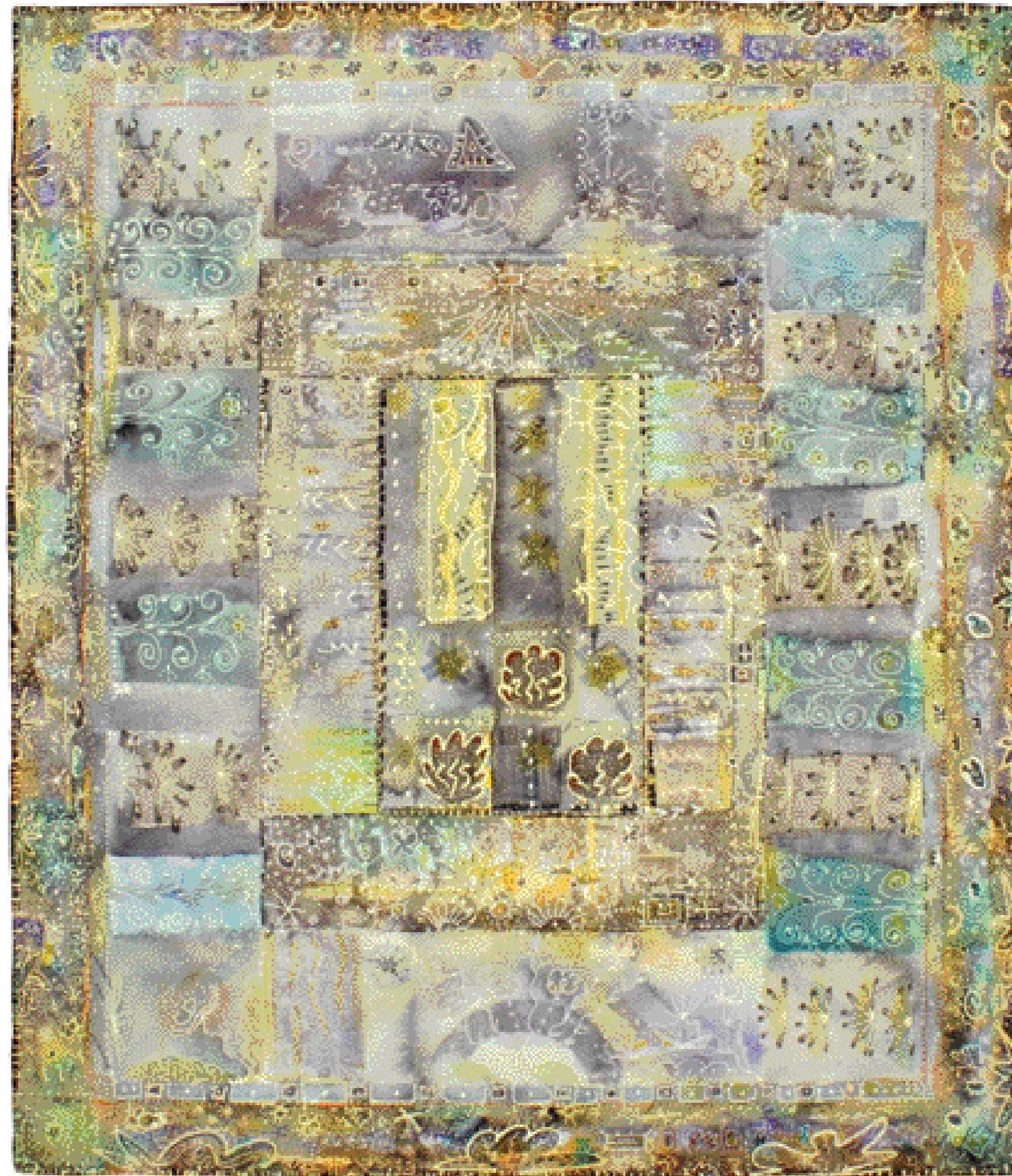
Certainly Kraft’s process shapes the content of her paintings. In a recent series, Terma Zones (*terma* means “hidden teachings” in Tibetan), the artist explored her longtime interest in borders, employing the masking fluid to create zones of imagery within each piece. “When I first did big pieces, I had to tape them down and this created a border,” she describes. “That border is like a frame. For the past seven or eight years I’ve wanted to make my colors more significant. If everything is a brilliant red, there is nothing to bounce off of it, so to make my colors glow, I used more secondary colors and more water. I started to build the



BELOW

Terma Zone No. 02

2007, watercolor and masking fluid, 30 x 25.





ABOVE
Cosmogenesis
 2006, watercolor,
 gouache, and masking
 fluid, 25 x 30.

RIGHT
**Flora and Fauna
 No. 7**
 2005, watercolor,
 gouache, and masking
 fluid, 14 1/4 x 11 1/4.
 Private collection.



zones into the center, utilizing the entire surface. The process liberated me from the way I was working before. I stopped using gouache as the final layer. To me this became another way to articulate my deep feelings and reverence for nature, to express the joy of it.”

The borders remind her of illuminated manuscripts and painted frames, such as the borders in Mughal and Flemish manuscripts, and this is one way in which Kraft’s paintings become meditative objects, art that contains hidden treasures. In her process of building up and taking away, gradually realizing the imagery, she searches for and brings forth all the treasures hidden within in her own deep connection to art and nature. ■

About the Artist

Trudy Kraft, born in Amarillo, Texas, now lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania. She studied art at Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York, and the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan. She has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions and was a finalist for a Pew Fellowship. Her paintings are in private, corporate, and museum collections, including the Amarillo Museum of Art and the Tyler Museum of Art, both in Texas; and the Mayo Clinic, in Rochester, Minnesota. She is represented by Gross McCleaf Gallery, in Philadelphia, which hosted a show of her work last March. To learn more, visit www.trudykraft.com or www.grossmccleafgallery.com.

BELOW
Terma Zone No. 13
 2007, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 22 x 16 1/2.

BOTTOM
Terma Zone No. 9
 2007, watercolor and
 masking fluid, 17 x 56.

