



ELIZABETH OSBORNE, FOREMOST, IS an artist of great, and eclectic, appetite. "Some artists will stay with one theme, like Morandi," she said on a wet afternoon in May, sitting in the first-floor studio of her house in Philadelphia's Fairmount neighborhood. "You always think of Morandi because he stuck with those little bottles, which were magnificent, for his whole life.

But I tended to move from one subject to another, and then go back again and revisit."

So she did, and still does. These days, Osborne, 73, has entered an abstract phase, painting works with metaphysical and cosmological titles that seem to have no subject at all, save light itself ("If a painting doesn't have light, somehow it dies," she told me).

artists envious; her rooftop garden, which glimpses Center City from one corner and the Museum of Art from another, probably more so.

I asked her about a harrowing, assemblage-style work composed of a splotchy, all-black canvas and a pair of windshield wipers, which sat on a lonely canvas (Osborne says she prefers to work on the wall and on the floor). She said she was touching up the work, which she made while living in Paris, for its owners, and our conversation turned to her early years, when several times she won grants to study in Europe.

"Whenever I could I would go visit an artist's studio. I saw Balthus's studio, I saw Cézanne's studio, I saw Giacometti's," she said. "You want to see how people work. It's fascinating."

Elizabeth **Osborne**: the interview

Again and again, she's returned to the landscape, painting en plein air in Maine, Arizona, Mexico and elsewhere; less often, she's been fascinated by cityscapes, particularly Philadelphia's skyline (her biological father, the French-born architect Paul Philippe Cret, designed the Benjamin Franklin Bridge). And true to her academic background, she has devoted much time to nudes and still-lives—in the 1950s, Osborne studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and became only its third female instructor in 1963 ("I wasn't a big feminist type, so I wasn't waving banners about that," she said). Yet, if anything unites the disparate arcs of her 50-year career, it's this: that Osborne's paintings don't simply inhabit the spaces between abstraction and representation so much as they gently, subtly and subversively blur them.

In an hour-long discussion several weeks before the opening of her career retrospective at the Academy (it runs through Sept. 20), Osborne, one of Philadelphia's best-known postwar painters, frequently returned to a theme of her salad days: where artists work.

For about a decade beginning in the mid-'60s, she painted in the Peale House, once the Belgravia Hotel, which at the time was owned by the Academy. "The hotel is free-standing, so there were great views on all sides," Osborne said. "I knew the caretaker, a Greek man who liked me, so in the summer there were no classes and he let me have my run of the building. And I would move around from one room to another, and set up, and work." (She said one of her favorites from those days, a city scene, was painted from inside the men's room.) Not long after, she rented a space in Old City, where she worked for 25 years.

"In the studio itself, I've always been fortunate in having pretty good space," she said. Well, almost. For a brief period, before she moved to the studio on Front Street, she worked in an erstwhile funeral home in Center City that still smelled like formaldehyde. "It was just dismal," she said with a concise chuckle. But her current space—large enough for Osborne to work on five or more works at once—would color most

Osborne described the time she spent in Paris, in 1963 and 1964, as something of an irony: She spent one of her most formative years in Europe while the art scene of New York City—agony over Rauschenberg and Johns—was in the throes of revolution. She said she wasn't unaware of what was going on, however; indeed, some of her works from that period easily could have emerged from New York's metro cars, and not Paris's.

In the ensuing years, she seemed to incorporate the lessons of the 1960s—as well as fin de siècle Post-Impressionism and the Color Grid artists of the 1970s—into her own singular, increasingly dulcet style. By the late 1970s, her watercolor works on paper (Osborne has largely worked in oils and acrylics) were commanding high prices in New York's Fischbach Gallery. And since the middle of that decade, she has been a mainstay of the Marian Locks Gallery on Washington Square.

But it's not for nothing that Osborne has always been somewhat of an outsider. Part of that status, PAFA Curator of Modern Art Robert Cozzolino told me during a phone interview in June, "has to do with regionalism." "She's really been loyal to Philadelphia," even though the city's postwar art scene has largely been overlooked. I asked him why Osborne—a favorite of collectors and critics—should be considered an important artist. "One reason is based on how influential she's been in the community, how many student she's taught, how people have come to the Academy and sought her out ... [From] a local and regional point of view, she's had a really lasting impact on the Philadelphia scene in terms of being a mentor."

As for Osborne's art, it too has deep Philadelphia roots, Cozzolino said: "One is the realist thread that comes from the Peale family and Thomas Eakins. And the other is this Modernist color tradition," he said, citing early 20th-century Philadelphia artists like Arthur B. Carles. "Liz takes both of those and integrates them in a way that's surprising. She's able to take these things and make them both realist and abstract."

What Osborne's career will mean to posterity, he said, is unclear: "Liz has never had a museum retrospective before, so in a way this is kind of a first pass." ■