

## [arts & antiques]



*In Yelena Klairmont's aerial landscape "Fearless: Conquer Darkness with Kindness," a stormy crimson sky dwarfs a glistening city.*

tycoon Julius Rosenwald. Noted naturalist and landscape architect Jens Jensen designed the grounds and those of other prominent North Shore families including the Armour's, the Florsheims and the Ryersons. In the painting, the weathered stone bridge and tree trunks blend with the earth while autumn leaves throw a golden glaze across the sky. Another painting at the Highland Park Public Library depicts a council ring where Native Americans gathered to make tribal decisions. "The council rings reminded Jensen of King Arthur's Round Table," Klairmont says, and he reincarnated them as gathering

## The Path Most Traveled

A Highland Park artist finds inspiration in day-to-day landscapes of life. *By Abigail Foerstner*

**Yelena Klairmont's paintings** open a pathway to achingly familiar places. A wooded trail winds along the North Shore's ravines. A river viewed from an airplane cuts a seam through the earth. The world fractures gently in the kaleidoscopic mirror of a pond.

Yet the Highland Park artist considers her luminous landscapes more about a state of mind than a style of art.

"There's always war and violence, so should we all do depressing art? Art should uplift people's souls," she says in defense of her unabashedly beautiful oil canvasses. "God to me is a constant source of energy — we can tap into it. We're vessels that transmit energy like glass does."

Klairmont, 45, fills her home with colorful art glass and stained-glass lamps. Her paintings seem radiant too, as though the glow of light somehow emanates from behind the skin of brush strokes.

"I use oil glazes in translucent layers in order to reveal the evanescent luminosity of things," Klairmont notes. Her success with a growing

exhibition and commission schedule reflects the enduring hold of traditional art as an oasis in contemporary life.

The current exhibit, *Landscapes*, features the artist in a two-person show through Aug. 8 at the Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art at the College of Lake County. Klairmont will be the featured artist in "Unfolding of Being," opening Oct. 1 at the Madron Gallery in Chicago, with a reception on Oct. 6 from 6:30-9:30 p.m. She also has work in collections at the Illinois Institute of Art, Imperial Realty Co., the Westin Chicago, Harris Bank in Highland Park and the City of Highland Park.

Klairmont's Russian childhood, her previous career as a musician and her peripatetic exploration of scenes just beyond her doorstep play into her paintings. "You don't have to go to Paris or different locations to find inspiration," she says. "Everything is within yourself." "Jensen's Bridge" commemorates a landmark in Highland Park's Rosewood Park, part of the former estate of Sears, Roebuck and Company

places in gardens and parks.

His reverence for other cultures and for the "breathing spaces" of public parks — including those he helped design and preserve throughout Chicago — make Jensen one of her heroes, Klairmont says. But while Jensen created natural sanctuaries, Klairmont stages potent visual dramas depicting nature's untamed turbulence and force. In the aerial landscape "Fearless: Conquer Darkness with Kindness," a stormy crimson sky dwarfs a glistening city, its perfect grid of geometry broken by a winding river. In "The Line of Skrimmage: Man Meets Nature," the magnificent Chicago skyline fringes the far more massive lakefront. Farm fields, factories and towns set the human hand on the land in several paintings and capture a mood of longing for home. But always in Klairmont's work nature commands the scene and leaves the sense of larger powers that can both shelter and destroy.

The recent aerial views give Klairmont an epic terrain to paint in contrast to the cocoon of the Alfred Caldwell Lily Pool just north of the Lincoln Park Zoo. Soft pastels in an overview landscape of the pond give it a misty, dreamlike quality, but a series of kaleidoscopic works isolate bits of reflection on the water, revealing a reflective parallel universe of distortion, heightened



color and upside-down perspectives. Bare tree branches zig zag across the water like tattered ribbons in "Caldwell Pond No. 13." Ripples create an abstraction of concentric circles in "Caldwell Pond No. 16," a pattern that echoes cosmic movement and forms.


Such diverse bodies of work pursued over just the past few years track Klairmont's development of visual harmony and tension.

"I had the rhythm, the beat, from my music." She began studying music as a young child in Kiev, Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union. Her family managed to leave there in 1979. They emigrated first to Italy and then to Canada, where her father, a nuclear engineer, was offered a job. Yelena Kudlov continued to study classical music at the University of Toronto and began teaching and conducting choral music. She met her husband, Alfred Klairmont, on a trip to Chicago. They later married, and she moved to the Chicago area, where Alfred helped run the family business, Imperial Realty Co.

Yelena pursued her music as an organist and choir director for many years, but she also continued with a lifelong hobby of making art. Soon she began doing large-scale murals for restaurants and offices. "I told them if they didn't like it, I'd paint over it in white," she says.

A turning point came in 1992, when she started classes at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. Mentor and painter John Trapp "taught us how to see," she says. She learned classic techniques of drawing and painting from him and some of her student work fills a corner of the upstairs studio of her home. While launching her new career, she and Alfred raised three children. She enthusiastically encouraged her daughter Laura's talent playing the piano, but Laura dropped her music and is now a sophomore majoring in journalism at the University of Iowa.

Meanwhile, Klairmont began studying the Zohar, a mystical interpretation of the Torah that poetically discusses the nature of God and the universe and traces back to Roman times. Some of the titles of Klairmont's aerials are drawn from the Zohar, which influenced her sense of the totality of being and the ability to tap into positive life forces.

"Ultimately, I am painting consciousness itself as it is revealed: illuminated, incarnate and fully materialized as the landscape we live in," she says. 

#### WHAT/WHERE/WHEN

"Nina Weiss and Yelena Klairmont: Landscapes," Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art, College of Lake County, 19351 W. Washington St., Grayslake. Through Aug. 8. Call 847/543-2240 or visit <http://gallery.clcillinois.edu>. "Unfolding of Being," Madron, a Gallery of American Art, 1000 W. North Ave., Chicago. Oct. 1-31, opening reception Oct. 6, 6:30-9:30 p.m. Call 312/640-1302 or visit [www.madrongallery.com](http://www.madrongallery.com). See Klairmont's cyber-gallery at [www.yelenaklairmont.com](http://www.yelenaklairmont.com).