

An abstract painting on a light blue background. It features soft, ethereal clouds in shades of blue and pink. Several thin, flowing red lines curve across the composition. On the right side, there are sharp, geometric black lines forming a complex web. A small, dark, textured shape is visible on the left, and a faint, star-like pattern of blue dots is on the right. The overall mood is dreamlike and contemplative.

LABOR *of Love*

A SAN DIEGO ARTIST'S ABSTRACT PAINTINGS ARE AS MUCH ABOUT THE JOURNEY AS THEY ARE ABOUT THE DESTINATION.

WRITTEN BY JENNIE NUNN / PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOU MORA

PHOTO: LEAH PANTEA

Artist Leah Pantéa (opposite, left) lives and works with her cat, Chauncey, in a historic building in San Diego. Her latest collection of paintings, dubbed the *Janus* series, fills her studio space and explores metaphysical questions.



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Growing up outside of Boulder, Colorado, Leah Pantéa saw more of the trees in the surrounding forest than she did her neighbors. The result? “There was a lot of self-entertaining, which I think lends itself to creating,” the artist recalls, noting that her mother taught her to draw something of her choosing every week. These days Pantéa lives and works in a more urban spot—a historic building in Sherman Heights near downtown San Diego. However, it was a sojourn in another remote locale that yielded her newest series dubbed *Janus*.

This time around, the place was a three-month residency in the teeny town of Skagaströnd, Iceland, where, inspired by Albert Rothenberg’s writings on creativity, Pantéa began the series. The result is abstract landscapes on hot-oil-pressed watercolor paper. Layered on top are

multiple coats of white paint and precise lines of black ink symbolizing constellations. “The pieces were inspired by my current standing with faith and the mysterious sprinkled with many other things,” Pantéa says, noting that when she began the collection she was struggling to understand why she couldn’t have all the answers to life’s big questions. “*Janus* came forth out of my reckoning with those feelings and this desire to understand why we don’t get to see the full picture—but that even the glimmer we get to understand can be beautiful on its own.”

For her pieces, Pantéa acknowledges her calculated and laborious process is just as important as the end result. “I will work on a painting in full color with excessive detail and many layers of paint until I imagine it ‘finished’ to the best of my ability,” she says. Only then does she apply the white paint over the work.

Pantéa's painstaking process involves carefully painting her imagery only to hide it in layers of white paint and precise lines (right and opposite). Recently, the artist began experimenting with embroidery (below), giving her practice yet another facet. Chauncey (far right) takes in the scene in the studio.



The pigment functions as a veil rather than as a means of camouflaging imperfections. In doing so, she asks the viewer to trust the work she produced based only on limited proof, creating an unusually rich dialogue with her audience.

In addition to her paintings, Pantéa is conceiving an all-white apparel line and experimenting with embroidery—an art form she became fascinated with while in Iceland. “I was so inspired by the labor that goes into such a small work of art,” Pantéa says. “So I began to embroider onto paper that I had smashed plants into, repeating a process I had seen.”

Pantéa sees parallels between embroidery and her painting practice. “I’m very drawn to art that is a lot of work but that doesn’t look like a lot of work,” she says. With embroidery, there are no short cuts, she points out; it requires hours of patience and focus to achieve a small result. Ultimately, the artist says, “The most exciting thing about creating something is when you reach the flow and you really trust your hands to carry through the mission.”

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