

# THE LANCET

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## Drama in a drop of water: the paintings of Betsy Stewart



*Betsy Stewart's paintings can be seen at the Walter Wickiser Gallery, New York City, NY, USA.*

**B**etsy Stewart is an artist who uses science for her own purposes. Her abstract paintings depict the impact that microscopic biological imagery has had on her imagination. The paintings meld art and science into a fluid mix of organic forms; referring to biology and the natural sciences, they reveal the hidden beauty of those worlds enhanced by a discerning visual creativity.

Based in Washington, DC, Stewart has been painting for 30 years. Trained as a dancer, she now devotes herself fully to painting in her studios in Washington and Lake Placid, New York. Her paintings have always depicted nature, however recently she started working with biological imagery. In her work, Stewart is interested in showing "cell cycles"—the transformation of cells through time and space. Many of her "cells" appear to be moving, enacting an arcane microcosmic dance. She sees in this process a unifying force with all living creatures. As she has stated, "We are an integral part of what we call nature."

The artist finds her biological models mostly from textbooks. Her subjects include various single-celled organisms, amoebas, paramecium, microscopic worms, and egg-like forms. Stewart combines them in an organic cocktail with abstract shapes and colours. Referring to ponds, molecules, and invisible life

forces, the end result is a biomorphic riff on the microscopic, macroscopic, and unconscious levels. The artist creates dense layers of paint and meaning, usually in a square or dramatically vertical format.

Stewart's *Nanos* paintings derive their name from the Greek word meaning "birth". Eggs and other circular shapes are shown in various stages of development. *Nanos #2*, a 36 inch square composition, shows a large white ovum being impregnated by a pointed shape full of smaller circles. Stewart combines this image with depictions of splitting cells, showing us the process of creation in life as well as in art. In Stewart's *Totem* series, slender vertical



*Nanos #2* (1999)

paintings can be seen as slices of pond life, examples of cellular organisation or just enjoyed as abstract designs. Their title and shape remind one of the totem poles of the northwestern Native Americans. At 39 inches tall (roughly the height of the artist) Stewart's totems depict some of our modern deities, the invisible forces (revealed by science and art) that make up nature, and ourselves. These forces seem to swim through time and space, existing in different realms simultaneously. Viewing these paintings is like watching a drama unfold in a drop of water.

Stewart's paintings show an Asian influence as well as a Native American one (the artist is a Buddhist). Stewart's main mediums are Japanese sumi ink combined with acrylic paint. With their scroll-like shapes, muted colours, and elegant compositions, Stewart adds stark geometric patterns to the sides of some of the works, a design she first noticed in Kabuki theatre. This lends a feel of overlapping cultures as well as scientific overtones in the work.

One of Stewart's goals in her work is to help the viewer feel more connected to the natural; to foster a realisation that the same substances and forces in us inhabit every living creature. She achieves her goal through harmony and beauty. Her paintings are gentle reminders that we are part of a larger order, one full of myriads of connected living creatures of subtle beauty.

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