

# A Moment Rescued

By Jim Brumm

*Sonoma County Watercolorist  
Sally Baker “Rescues” Moments  
of Color, Light and Texture*

**B**arefoot, relaxed and smiling, Sonoma County artist Sally Baker sits in her Sebastopol studio in a leather chair with her legs drawn up. Several silver rings adorn the fingers of each hand; her face is framed by shoulder-length curly hair. Using her hands for emphasis, she talks about art and life. Here in her studio, where the magic happens, we are surrounded by her art, the vivid colors, rich textures and images underscoring her words.

“I want people to look at my work and not get it in one glance,” she said. “I want them to feel pulled in and make new discoveries each time they see it.”

As she speaks my eyes roam from her face to the paintings which fill the room. I *do* see something new each time I look, and my eyes are drawn back again and again.

Sally Baker didn’t plan to be an artist during her childhood in the Los Angeles area. But while attending the University of California at Santa Barbara she signed up for a fine arts course, simply to fulfill her art requirement for graduation, and it changed her life.



“I took that class and knew I had found a home,” she said, smiling.

Though she is known today as a watercolorist, that class was a ceramics class, and Sally’s first foray into the world of art was as a ceramicist. “I loved using my hands to create something tangible,” she said. “I liked the feeling of working with clay and creating . . . capturing, negative space.”

During college she met her husband, Neil, who played football for the college team. After graduating with degrees in art and teaching, Sally secured a job at a junior high school as an art teacher. A year later she was hired to teach high school art in Culver City, California, and stayed there 10 years, teaching ceramics, home economics and leather craft.

In 1982, Sally and Neil were invited to visit friends in Sonoma County. “We happened to get here in March, when the hills were like the Emerald City,” said Sally. They fell in love with the area and decided to move to Sebastopol, where they’ve been ever since.

Right before leaving Southern California Sally took a watercolor class. Then, upon arriving in Sonoma





Though her earlier paintings of adobe structures used soft, muted hues, Sally's paintings today are rife with vivid colors that leap off the canvas and capture the viewer's eye. Each tells a story, and each combines texture and color seamlessly. Wood

County, she took watercolor workshop in Napa, and her life direction was changed again. "I had found my place . . . my medium," said Sally. "I was so excited because my instructor saw things the way I wanted to paint them."

"It wasn't just about painting a pretty picture," Sally explained, her eyes flashing. "It was planned and designed, with saturated colors and a sense of space and volume. I had learned about volume in my ceramic work and now in my paintings I am able to create the illusion of that volume."



grain, glass, cloth and metal coalesce with flowers or fruits and vegetables in a soft cacophony of color and light, shadow and space.

Many of Sally's paintings incorporate pottery, a nod to her days as a ceramicist, and many have a decidedly Asian flavor in theme and composition. "Asian influences started creeping into my paintings," she said. "I didn't know why, but then remembered my parent's best friends were Asian importers. We used to go to their house for dinner and be surrounded by Asian art. I hadn't thought of it for years, but I guess it imprinted deeply. I love Asian art, and I love pottery; you can see it in my paintings, though I'm not doing ceramics anymore."

Sally explained a little about the process. "Each painting is like a puzzle. I plan each composition before picking up a brush, and I know what must come first and what comes last. Each painting is different and each presents different challenges."

Sally paints slowly, with what she calls "stick-to-itiveness." She realizes that we live in a fast-paced society and sometimes people have trouble focusing, always wanting to get on to the next thing. Sally wants to help us slow down and learn how to see with an artist's eyes. She shared a story about a day at school when the sky was particularly dramatic and beautiful. She made every one of her students go out and look at the sky before entering her classroom.

"None of them had looked up all day," she said. "They were missing the world around them. I try to 'rescue' moments,"

she added after a pause, "moments that would be gone forever if I didn't catch them with my brush. Out of all the possible moments, I get to choose one and save it forever."

She gestured to the art surrounding us in her studio and said, "When I look at my work there's a certain stillness—a certain contemplation. I am trying to create form, depth and shape in two dimensions. I am trying to evoke feelings. Much art today is very surfacy. I think it can be both about emotion and the image."

Look at Sally Baker's art. Then look again. If you can accept the invitation that each piece extends to delve ever



more deeply into the worlds she has created, if you are willing to let the colors, images, shadows, light and textures wash over you and through you—to be still—you, too, may share the grace of a moment rescued.

Visit Sally Baker's Web site at [www.sallybaker.com](http://www.sallybaker.com).