



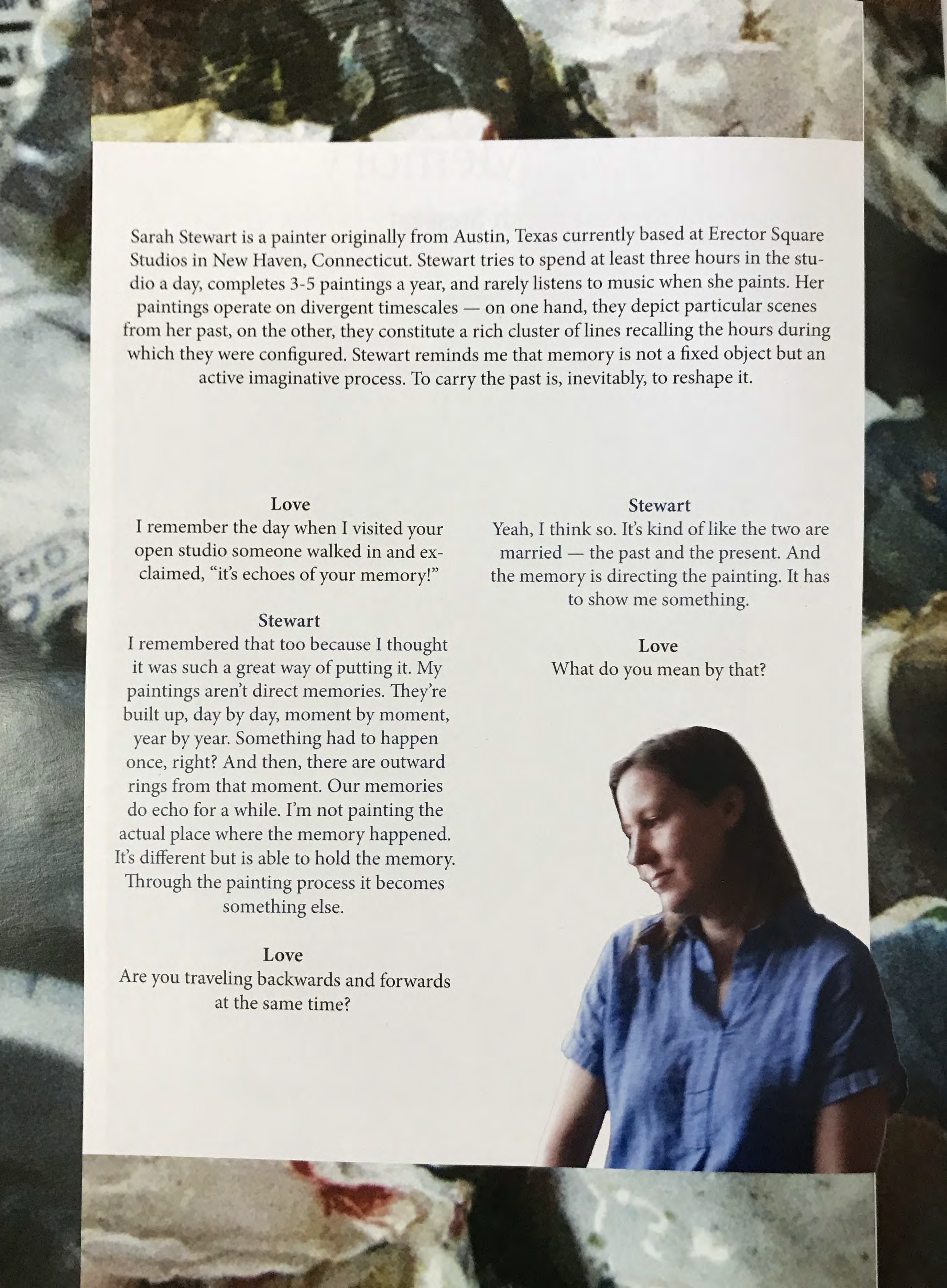
Echoes of Memory

an interview with Sarah Stewart

by Harper Love



Brown Bear



Sarah Stewart is a painter originally from Austin, Texas currently based at Erector Square Studios in New Haven, Connecticut. Stewart tries to spend at least three hours in the studio a day, completes 3-5 paintings a year, and rarely listens to music when she paints. Her paintings operate on divergent timescales — on one hand, they depict particular scenes from her past, on the other, they constitute a rich cluster of lines recalling the hours during which they were configured. Stewart reminds me that memory is not a fixed object but an active imaginative process. To carry the past is, inevitably, to reshape it.

Love

I remember the day when I visited your open studio someone walked in and exclaimed, “it’s echoes of your memory!”

Stewart

I remembered that too because I thought it was such a great way of putting it. My paintings aren’t direct memories. They’re built up, day by day, moment by moment, year by year. Something had to happen once, right? And then, there are outward rings from that moment. Our memories do echo for a while. I’m not painting the actual place where the memory happened. It’s different but is able to hold the memory. Through the painting process it becomes something else.

Love

Are you traveling backwards and forwards at the same time?

Stewart

Yeah, I think so. It’s kind of like the two are married — the past and the present. And the memory is directing the painting. It has to show me something.

Love

What do you mean by that?



Stewart

These are great memories, but I'm compelled to paint them, make something present, make something visible. I think there is something else going on. The memory is driving something and helping me to find meaning today.

But the painting, in the end, it's more than the memory. It brings something invisible and makes it visible. Something about who I am and who my voice is. It feels good to be able to find that in the painting.

Love

What do you think it is about paintings that makes the invisible visible?

Stewart

I think there's something I can only find in the process of painting. I'm with these paintings for a long time. They take months. Some of them take years. So I'm really getting to know their internal structure. These decisions about symmetry, these decisions about color. How do we expand the space to a world inside them?

Love

Would you say that your paintings take a series of mundane gestures and turn them into something grand?

Stewart

That's how it started. The technique is based on a natural arm movement—something that the arm does easily. There is something interesting going on with the layering of the lines. Every time you make one mark of a line, it opens up space around that line. Each mark, for some reason, opens up space. And I love that shallow space in a painting that I can kind of inhabit.

The repetition of the swooping lines in my work speaks to me about the continual feeling of the passage of time. Or the continual movement of time. Something that is always present, and the work, through my daily process documents that.

Love

Do you associate your paintings with people?

Stewart

This brown painting here. My dear friend who is also a painter, Riley, wears this big brown coat in the winter. The name of that painting is Brown Bear. Whenever I think of that painting I think of Riley and his brown coat.

The little green painting, whenever I look at it, I'm reminded of an ex-boyfriend that I had. While I was painting it I needed to get over that relationship and forgive him maybe, forgive myself. That was processed while painting that.

Love

Do you associate your paintings with the time you spent working on them?

Stewart

They're a record of that period of my life. That makes it hard to part ways with them.

photos by Addy Gorton



I keep going and going and going, almost to the point of questioning — *what am I doing, this is crazy, why would anyone paint this way?* And then finally the painting won't let me do anything else.

Love

How do you know when you're finished?

Stewart

It's really hard to know. Especially with paint because it takes a while to dry. And my paintings are so light sensitive and delicate on the surfaces. I can have a painting and think, *that's it, it's done!* But I'll come in a week or a couple days later, when the paint has dried in, and think, *what happened?* That happens all the time. So I'll keep painting.

I'll have a painting that could be done, but I kind of know that it isn't quite where I want it to be. So I keep going and going and going, almost to the point of questioning — *what am I doing, this is crazy, why would anyone paint this way?* And then finally the painting won't let me do anything else. I feel it in my core that some paintings are done.



Heart