

A SYMPHONY IN COLOR

An Interview with Artist Martina Nehrling

Written by Jeffrey Cohen



Martina Nehrling

I was already aware of artist Martina Nehrling before she rose to prominence both regionally and nationally. She and my wife attended North Central High School together, and their mothers were close. After the artist moved to Chicago, where she found considerable success, we fell somewhat out of touch until an opportunity arose recently to sit down in the Windy City and chat about her history, philosophy and latest works. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

JC: Were you interested in art while you were living in Indianapolis, and can you speak to your early influences?

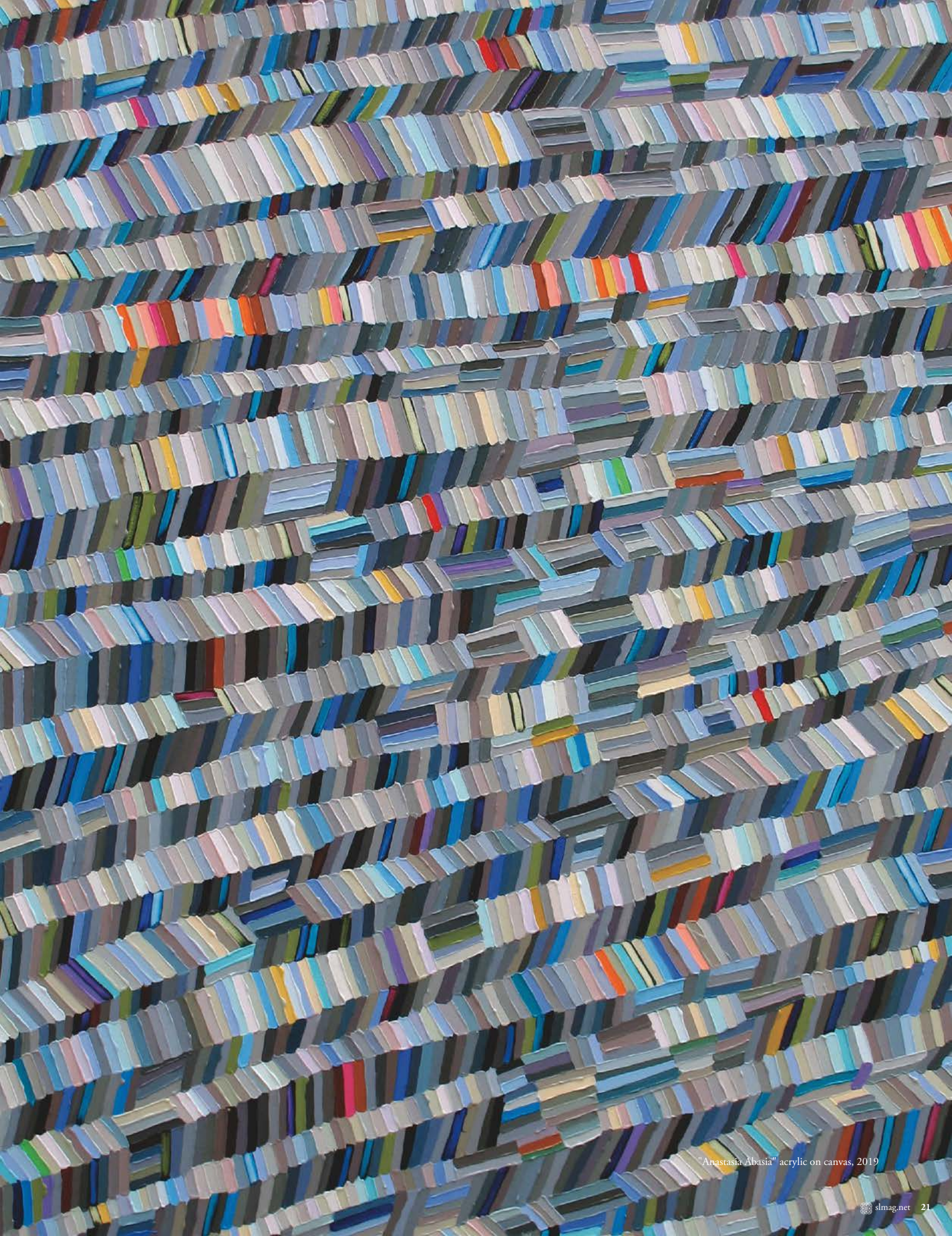
MN: I was fortunate to be in a school system with a strong arts program. In addition to really wonderful and encouraging art teachers, my interest and talent was nurtured by an extra-curricular program in which I participated from elementary school through high school. My grandpa, Wally Nehrling, a popular morning radio personality on WIRE for very many years, was a wonderfully animated presence in my youth, and I credit him for inspiring an outgoing spirit in me. I was lucky to have an abundance of creativity in my family: my grandma wrote poetry, my uncle Daniel was an artist, my aunt Tina is an actress and playwright, and her son Rudy is a talented actor, too.

I understand a sculpture of your design is on the campus of North Central High School. Tell us about that.

That was the result of a design competition I won when I was a sophomore. I loved high school and maybe with an unusual objectivity at my age, I wanted to allude to the significance, yet brevity, of those years before we all would shoot off in different directions.

Tell me more about what inspires you? How has that evolved?

Color has always been central to my inspiration. To me, colors very nearly have a living presence with which I'm compelled to interact. Though employing a full spectrum of saturated color as I often do can appear deceptively simple or easily pleasing, its formal complexity spurs my engagement. I enjoy mining its controversial decorativeness and navigating its mercurial emotiveness in visual rhythms, usually comprised of a multitude of distinct brushstrokes of color. In this way, I almost hear the imagery develop with a visual language. I experience a musicality in the visual.



"Anastasia Abasia" acrylic on canvas, 2019

Expound on that.

The places where I most often hang my thoughts are located in the natural environment, and usually at a more intimate scale, such as my neighborhood or my garden. It's not by chance that I find inspiration this way. I enjoy observing the way forms grow, spread, shift scale, color, or texture, all of which is nearly audible to me. These observations are source material from which I can quote or transcribe visual rhythms that are resonant, discordant, muscular, or mellifluous.

Tell me about your process. Do you make sketches before painting?

I usually know where I want to go, or at least where I want to begin, so my sketches look like diagrams that map out color shifts or changes in the direction of mark making, and sometimes the position of positive and negative space. They're very minimalist.


I also create color 'tests' which have their own aesthetic that I've grown especially fond of lately. To borrow a jazz term, these are like little riffs. I was recently commissioned to do a label for a Benziger family wine called Imagery. Right off, I knew I wanted to create a piece composed of these riffs in stanzas, seeing them as analogous to tasting notes.

I write down things I come across, or things I hear my friends and neighbors say, that beg for a visual exploration. There are pages of these notes in my sketchbooks, and a wall in my studio is littered with Post-its that contain these image sparks. And often the notes become titles.

Does one need to understand art to like it? For example, what do you say to a person who doesn't find they understand abstraction?

You like what you like and there's nothing wrong with that. I've thought a lot about this. It's a natural human reaction to feel some hostility about that for which we don't readily have a reference. The more one is exposed to art of all kinds, terms like 'representation' and 'abstraction' are distinctions that matter less than the specificity of what you see and how it's operating. Consider instrumental music: that is a form of pure abstraction that is familiar and comfortable to most of us. In other words, abstraction has already accessed most of us.

Lastly, where can readers find your work?

I am represented by Kathryn Markel Fine Arts in New York, www.markelfinearts.com. Also, my website, www.martinanehring.com, features recent work as well as pieces that are in private collections in order to show some trajectory. 



"Afloat" acrylic on canvas, 2018