

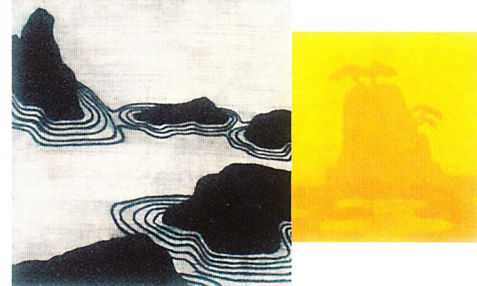
Clockwise from far left: In her Manhattan studio, Bigelow stands in front of a work in progress. *Small Ghost Willow*, 2007. *Three Willows*, 2006. *Yellow Island*, 2005. *Islands and Gardens*, 2004. See Resources.



Isabel Bigelow

This emerging artist's background in religious studies brings a state of grace to her landscape paintings

By Linda Yablonsky



From top: *Fall (Gold)*, 2007. *Bare Branches*, 2004.



Some people would say that painting is a spiritual act, but as a student Isabel Bigelow took this idea literally. After entering Harvard University in 1984, Bigelow eschewed a fine-arts major in favor of comparative religion. "The ideas and methods of prayer and ritual resonate profoundly with the practice of creating art," says the New York City artist. "Through the process of painting—the repeated marks and motions—something happens that brings about a transcendent moment."

Though simple in form, Bigelow's modestly scaled landscape paintings share a powerful stillness. On smooth birch panels to which she applies criss-crossing brushstrokes of gesso, the natural world is distilled into elemental, architectonic forms, often suggesting the stylized patterns of Japanese screens. The clouds, boulders, and skies typical of her work can be viewed on several levels—as

specific natural forms, or as vast and Platonic ideals of beauty and proportion. "Encountering my work is similar to a person coming to a particular curve of a hill again and again or seeing the light at a certain time of day," she explains. "It's so familiar but also never quite the same."

Of late, Bigelow has been focusing on trees, exploring shadow and light and what she calls "the spaces in between." She's especially fond of willows, with their chandelier-like hairdos. "They have a personality," she says. "They're sad, weepy, funereal—silly, too, to my eye."

Falling leaves feature prominently in new paintings headed for an exhibition at Manhattan's Sears-Peyton Gallery in Chelsea this spring. In one panel, they seem to flutter across an overcast sky like migrating birds. "I'm looking for a feeling of being inside a painting," she says, "one that will echo the experience of looking up and seeing light through trees and having no beginning or end." In the realm of the spirit—or, for that matter, in art—you can hardly get more divine than that. ■