

GAYLE KABAKER'S "IN THE SWIM OF THINGS"

The artist discusses her love of teaching and where she feels most at home.

By Françoise Mouly

Art by Gayle Kabaker

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As record levels of heat press upon many regions of the world, our thoughts have turned to finding ways to cool off. We have traded our sneakers for sandals, turned our fans up high, and sought out spots near bodies of water. In her new summer cover, Gayle Kabaker depicts what seems like the ideal refreshing spot: standing in shimmering water, looking out over a pristine landscape. I talked to the artist about why the tropics make her feel inspired, and how her marriage influences her art.

This cover captures a moment of pure enjoyment. Is it based on a real place?

Ironically, this summer cover was painted in the winter in Puerto Rico, in El Yunque, after a week with the family at a beach in Rincón, where we've gone many times. New England winters are brutal, and we often try to spend some time in the tropics. Painting water and people in the tropics make me feel like my soul is home—maybe it has to do with growing up in the tropical heat of Hong Kong.



The artist's setup while on vacation in El Yunque, Puerto Rico.

Do you paint on location?

I'm not much of a plein-air painter, so I take tons of photos to paint from later. I use my photos as inspiration, not to copy. I teach this technique in my weeklong workshops, on Zoom, and in person when travelling all over the world with my friend and co-teacher Jennifer Orkin Lewis. Our main goal is to show people how to find joy and have fun while painting. For me, this means changing any photo or live scene to be however I want it to be. I really love travelling and teaching and find it very gratifying to see people bust through their fears and grow as painters over the course of the seminars.

You're married to an artist. How do you think that relationship has changed your creative trajectory?

Interesting question! I moved with Peter Kitchell, a successful artist known for his large abstract watercolors, from San Francisco to western Massachusetts thirty-six years ago. I was a somewhat successful freelance illustrator, but, after we moved, I was mostly known as Peter's wife. Then, years later, when our teen-age musician daughter got a record deal and became successful, I was introduced as Sonya Kitchell's mom. It wasn't until my first *New Yorker* cover, eleven years ago, that friends began introducing me as Gayle Kabaker who had a *New Yorker* cover. So I am grateful for that.

Peter has always been hugely supportive; he understands when I want to go away to paint alone. I find these solo painting retreats inspiring and a necessary part of my creative process. I can get lonely, but, as long as I know he's home holding down the fort with our dog Charlie, I can go off and feel good about it. And I totally trust Peter's creative eye. If he says a painting I've done is good, I know it's good. If he doesn't like it, I often revisit what I've done.

A show of your work opened at the Pen + Brush gallery last week. How did that come about?

It started with Trump's election, which devastated me and made me want to focus my art on voting. I painted a superhero woman in a cape with the words "Voting Is My Super Power" on her chest. Alyse Nelson, the C.E.O. and co-founder (with Hillary Clinton) of Vital Voices, saw it and contacted me. I began working on projects with them and, a few years later, we did our book "Vital Voices: 100 Women Using Their Power to Empower," for which I painted a hundred portraits in eight months! Last year, Stacey Yael of Visible Women contacted me after seeing the book, wanting to collaborate with a talking circle at Pen + Brush, where she has been successfully hosting important conversations, connecting and collaborating with trailblazing entrepreneurs and creators.

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