

ON THE COVER

IOANNA STEFOU

The work of Ioanna Stefou opens a quiet space between observation, emotion, and human presence. In this context, The Guide Artists presents her as the Artist of the Month, highlighting a body of work rooted in realism, sensitivity, and emotional depth.

Her practice explores the human figure as a space for communication, intimacy, and inner truth. Through carefully observed portraits, subtle expressions, and a refined use of light, Stefou creates images that invite stillness and contemplation, looking beyond physical resemblance to reveal what lies beneath the surface.

This selection reflects a curatorial focus on artists who combine technical discipline with emotional depth. In Ioanna Stefou's work, realism becomes a quiet and intimate language, shaped by observation, presence, and sensitivity.



“HER WORK LOOKS BEYOND PHYSICAL RESEMBLANCE TO EXPLORE PRESENCE, EMOTION, AND INNER TRUTH.”

IOANNA STEFOU: LOOKING BEYOND THE VISIBLE

Ioanna Stefou is an architect and painter currently based in Athens, Greece. Fascinated by painting from a very young age, she gradually developed a deep passion for realism and for the expressive power of the human figure. After working as an architect for more than a decade, painting became her primary focus, especially after 2014, when she attended a course at the New York Academy of Art.

For Stefou, painting is a form of communication, a visual language through which she explores human nature with sensitivity, depth, and honesty. Her work is guided by a sincere interest in people, their presence, their emotions, and the quiet complexity that often remains beneath the surface. She finds inspiration in everyday life, observing the people, gestures, moods, and subtle expressions that surround her. Many of her portraits are based on individuals from her immediate environment, allowing her to create works that feel intimate, personal, and deeply connected to lived experience.

Through each portrait, Stefou seeks to identify and capture the sitter's inner truth. Her work is not limited to physical resemblance; instead, it aims to reveal something more profound, the emotional atmosphere, vulnerability, strength, and individuality of the person portrayed. Her paintings often invite the viewer to pause and look beyond the visible image, encouraging a more contemplative encounter with the subject.

Her artistic process combines both direct and indirect painting methods, rooted in the classical approach to realism while maintaining a contemporary perspective. This balance between tradition and personal interpretation gives her work a refined visual language, where technical precision serves emotional expression. Through composition, light, texture, and color, Stefou builds images that are both carefully observed and deeply human.

In addition to her figurative work, Stefou also paints landscapes. She is particularly intrigued by the element of water and its inherent unpredictability, exploring its movement, reflections, atmosphere, transparency, and constantly changing nature. For her, water offers endless painterly possibilities, as it can suggest stillness, transformation, depth, and mystery within the same image.

Drawn to the expressive qualities of oil paint, Stefou continually experiments with new techniques and approaches, seeking to expand her visual language while remaining faithful to realism, observation, and emotion. Her practice reflects a constant dialogue between discipline and intuition, between the visible world and the inner life of the subject.

Her work is held in private collections.

All paintings are available for acquisition. Each piece is part of the artist's ongoing work.



Petals of time . Oil on linen

“THROUGH PAINTING, I BECAME CLOSER TO MY OWN EMOTIONS. MANY TIMES, I UNDERSTOOD WHAT I WANTED TO EXPRESS ONLY AFTER I HAD COMPLETED A PAINTING.”

Your training began in architecture, and you later continued your studies at art academies outside Greece. What did you discover in painting that architecture could no longer offer you, and at what point did you realize that this medium allowed you a more personal and emotional language?

It was a smooth transition because I have been painting for as long as I can remember. I will never forget visiting a museum at the age of eleven. I was so fascinated by the smell of the paintings that I asked my parents to buy me oil paints and canvases.

I studied Architecture at the National Technical University of Athens and worked in the field for many years. At the same time, painting was always my way of expressing myself and relaxing in my free time. There was a period in my life when I was constantly moving between countries, and during that time I began to focus more seriously on painting, simply because I could set up a studio anywhere.

In architecture, I did not have the same freedom that I have in painting: the freedom to create whatever I imagine, without rules or limitations. Through painting, I became closer to my own emotions. Many times, I understood what I wanted to express only after I had completed a painting.

In what ways do these two stages of your education—architecture and fine arts—now enter into dialogue in the way you think about composition, space, and structure within painting? Are there any architectural principles you still apply when constructing your paintings?

Architecture and painting share fundamental principles such as composition, structure, the perception of light and space, harmony, proportion, and artistic movements. The process of creating a painting, for me, follows stages similar to architectural thinking: it begins with an initial idea, continues with notes and sketches, then a deep familiarization with the subject, the development of the composition, and finally the construction of the work.

I consciously apply architectural principles in my paintings, especially in the way I build form. To a great extent, I place my brushstrokes so that they construct the spatial environment or reinforce the central subject, giving it a three-dimensional presence.

Academic training often emphasizes technical mastery and rigorous observation. How did this type of education shape your pictorial language, the discipline of your creative process, and your daily practice as a painter?

My academic training gave me, above all, discipline and respect for the process. The emphasis on observation taught me to truly see my subject, to understand its structure, proportions, and the relationships between light and space before I begin to work. Careful observation also allows me to reintroduce elements that may have been lost in a photograph but remain present in my memory and in my notes.

At the same time, technical training provided me with tools to express myself with greater clarity. In my daily practice, this translates into consistency, method, and continuous study, elements I consider essential to the development of my pictorial language.

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“EXPLORING UNCHARTED
TERRITORY IS WHAT KEEPS
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Alexandra . Oil on wood

“THERE IS A KIND OF MAGIC IN PAINTING: EVERYTHING YOU HAVE SEEN, STUDIED, AND ADMIRERED SOMEHOW FINDS ITS WAY INTO YOUR PERSONAL VOICE.”

Are there artists, movements, or even architects who continue to influence your work today?

How do those influences interact with your own personal voice?

There are countless artists and movements I admire, and while my preferences have changed over time, my appreciation for Michelangelo, Vermeer, Bouguereau, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Klimt remains timeless. Among more contemporary artists, I admire Gerhard Richter, Gottfried Helnwein, Steven Assael, Alyssa Monks, Charles Belle, and others.

In my work, these influences emerge almost unconsciously. There is a kind of magic in painting: everything you have seen, studied, and admired somehow finds its way into your personal voice.

How do you choose color, texture, and materials in your work? Do you intend for these elements to convey specific emotions, or do they emerge more from intuitive experimentation?

I usually work with oil on linen, and sometimes I create charcoal drawings as preliminary studies. My choices are both intuitive and intentional. Many times, the subject influences the colors I choose, although I also like to experiment and discover what works best.

Texture varies as well. When I paint faces and figures, I build up many thin layers to render the skin accurately. In landscapes, I use a thicker, more abstract

brushstroke. Even when the marks are small, they remain abstract because that approach gives me the energy and movement I want a landscape to convey.

I am aware that color can guide the viewer's eye. When I want to create more drama, I often choose a black background and use strong shadows on the faces. Black enhances emotion and brings the viewer face to face with a certain truth.

How do your personal experiences and inner world filter into the work, and how do you transform the intimate into something others can relate to?

My inner world flows instinctively into my work because I paint exactly what interests or moves me, without trying to control or direct the outcome. I believe that when you stay true to your inner truth, something personal can become universal. That honesty is what allows others to see themselves in the work. When people connect with something they see in it, I know it has fulfilled its purpose. It is no longer just descriptive, but something that truly resonates.

When you begin a new work, do you start from a clear idea, or do you allow the image to reveal itself over the course of the process? What role does intuition play in that journey, and what challenges have you encountered in moving from an architectural approach—where everything is planned—to painting, where the unexpected can become part of the creative process?

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Rebirth . Oil on linen



“QUITE OFTEN THE PAINTING SHIFTS DIRECTION ALONG THE WAY AND BEGINS TO SPEAK FOR ITSELF.”

I always start from a specific idea. It might be a feeling, a photograph, or a narrative. In fact, I keep an archive of ideas waiting to be realized. I usually take many photographs and choose the one that speaks to me the most, and often I combine elements from different images to create something new. Once I settle on a composition, the first study gives me a sense of how the final work might look.

However, quite often the painting shifts direction along the way and begins to speak for itself, almost guiding me toward where it wants to go. I listen to that moment, and it is magical because it is unpredictable. Trusting that moment, along with my intuition, plays a huge role. It is also important not to be afraid of taking risks. Oil paint is a very forgiving material, so you can move back and forth many times.

Many painters speak of “rhythm” or “movement” within their compositions. How do you work with these aspects in your paintings, and how do they contribute to the viewer’s experience?

I strongly believe in the power of composition for the final outcome of a work. Rhythm and movement are essential elements that help guide the viewer’s eye through the painting. I try to incorporate rhythm through the alternation of light and shadow, or through the repetition of colors. Most of the time, however, this happens intuitively, by adjusting and refining the composition rather than planning it in advance.

Beyond the visual aspect, do you aim for your painting to generate a sensory or narrative experience? How do you encourage the viewer to feel or imagine something beyond what is strictly visible in the work?

Yes, I almost always aim for my paintings to convey an emotion, and sometimes a narrative. I often use objects with symbolic meaning related to the figure, which help the viewer think but never reveal the full story. What I enjoy most is seeing the different ways people interpret a work, and how each perspective can reveal something new about it. Also, my titles are never descriptive. I would say they are more enigmatic.

At the same time, I often work with the sea, not just as a landscape, but as an emotional space. For me, the ocean represents movement, uncertainty, and transformation, while the body represents presence and stillness.

Looking at your current practice, what questions are guiding you as an artist today, and in which directions do you feel your work might evolve in the coming years?

I am currently guided by questions around memory, vulnerability, and the tension between strength and fragility. I often ask myself what the role of realism is in a world saturated with digital imagery, and how it can continue to reveal truths about human experience.

I aim to express timeless emotions while staying connected to my time. I do not know exactly where my work will go in the future, but one thing is certain: I will always enjoy experimenting and evolving. Exploring uncharted territory is what keeps my flame for art alive.

LEFT | Anamnesis . Oil on linen

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The Promise . Oil on linen