



## Sharon Ellis

Sharon Ellis is to be admired for her talent and her courage to speak in an unconventional language. Her works offer surface delights of electric beauty but more importantly are profound and unique visions.

Nancy Dustin Wall Moore,  
consultant California art

was especially taken with the medieval paintings at the Cloisters. They led me to develop my technique of layering glazes." This is the technique that gives Ellis's works that mysterious and expansive feeling. Using oil alkyd paints she builds up as many as sixty or seventy translucent layers on the canvas in a way that makes light as important a medium as pigment.

Ellis's view of the natural world is informed by her appreciation of the writings of Thoreau, Keats, and Wordsworth, as well as by the visionary worlds of William Blake and Samuel Palmer, whose *Lonely Tower* of 1880 is Ellis's favorite piece at the Huntington. "Their intimate and emotional relationship with nature has guided my own work," she says. "Beauty and mystery are integral parts of both creativity and nature."

Beyond these inspirations, art critic Dave Hickey has located many other "improbable ancestors" of Ellis's work: the "extravagant intricacies of Jackson Pollock...floral accoutrements of Caravaggio...the hallucinatory specificity of Caspar David Friedrich and Philipp Otto Runge...the complexities of Burne-Jones and Bridget Riley...the stillness of Seurat," not to mention "psyche-

delic," "hallucinogenic," "magical," "visionary"—these terms have all been used to describe the paintings of Sharon Ellis. But in the end she is a landscapist, and while her works have also been described as "expansive," they are far from the sweeping views of an Albert Bierstadt or a Thomas Hill. Expansive in Ellis's case means that her images seem to have an infinite depth, and glow from within.

Ellis moved to California from her native Illinois as a young girl. By high school she knew she wanted to be a painter, but it wasn't until after she received her M.A. from Mills College and moved to New York that she developed her personal style. "Moving to New York was a fabulous education for me—it allowed me to see so much 'old' art that I hadn't really seen in California. I

Painter Sharon Ellis in the wisteria arbor of the Rose Garden, planted for Huntington in 1908 by his first garden curator, William Hertrich (1880–1966). The dappled sunlight evokes the sprays of stars and sunbeams Ellis often includes in her paintings.

*Moondance* by Ellis, 2011. Alkyd on canvas, 34 by 40 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Christopher Grimes Gallery, Santa Monica, California.



*The Lonely Tower* by Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), 1880. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 6 1/2 by 9 1/4 inches. Though acquired after Huntington's death, this watercolor reflects his interest in the work of William Blake and his circle. The subject is based on John Milton's "Il Penseroso." Palmer's mixture of watercolor and gouache creates a rich texture, glowing with soft light and expressing a magical mood.

delic posters from the Fillmore and Technicolor films from the sixties, with the mandarin aestheticism of Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery."

In situating Ellis work in the context of California women painters, art historian Nancy Moure writes: "Like certain artists of the 1920s and 1930s, including Adele Watson, Mabel Alvarez, and Agnes Pelton, Ellis uses non-personal motifs to express her inner spirit. Some of her paintings have a conventional landscape format and exist as magical personal Edens. Others are symmetrical and reminiscent of religious icons although otherworldly, using light to convey spirit, sometimes to evoke a sinister or foreboding ambiance. Yet others are up-front, exuberant, all-over patterns, balancing enamel-like color and motif to project her inner joy."

Ellis's *Moondance*, completed last fall, is one of these last. It is the first of a group of paintings "that will share the theme of night in some way," she says—though "it remains to be seen exactly where this theme will go!"

"Sharon Ellis: Modest Ecstasy," in *Excavations: Sharon Ellis, 1991–2001* (Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, Cal., 2002), p. 11.

