

# The Joy and Anxiety of Artistic Creation

Interview with Riva Sweetrocket By Negar Shirazi

*Riva Sweetrocket, contemporary U.S. artist and daughter of well known poet Marilyn Krysl, has been creating art since age 3. She received a degree in Psychology from the University of Colorado at Boulder, but is primarily a self-taught professional working artist. She has shown her work at various galleries in Boulder and Denver Colorado, and is rapidly expanding her audience to include venues on a national scale. This is her first interview outside the United States. An extensive collection of her recent work can be viewed online at: [www.sweetrocket.com](http://www.sweetrocket.com).*

**Could you start with an introduction of your work?**

My work consists primarily of large-scale soft pastel paintings on paper. My subject matter ranges from real to surreal in nature and most recently includes a mixture of organic and inorganic elements.

**Could you please describe the technique that you use?**

Soft pastel does not require a brush. I draw with my fingers or often my whole hand, blending the pastel to create the effect I'm looking for. I always wear gloves and a mask when I'm working, as pastel dust can be toxic. I mount my paper directly on the wall and I'm standing when I paint. My paintings are so large that to cover the whole space really involves a lot of physical movement. I am often up on a step ladder, and it can be a bit of a workout.

**How has your mother, Marilyn Krysl, inspired you as an artist?**

Very positively. Watching her succeed as a writer while I was growing up was a huge inspiration. An inspiration as well as something to live up to. Even today when I hear her read I'm in awe. Her writing conveys such dignity, courage and strength. I want my art to do the same thing. I think it's more difficult to accomplish this with a static image, but I'm working on it.

**How spontaneous are you when you paint?**

Probably less spontaneous than most artists. I always start out with a plan for a painting. I

**Do your paintings carry political or symbolic messages?**

Yes and no. I am aware of what a painting means to me, but I leave it to the viewer to make up his or her own story about the piece.

I use a considerable amount of red in my paintings. Red is such an emotional color—it's arresting. And it's a symbol for so many different things: passion, anger, blood, pain, power... I like it because it's so intense.

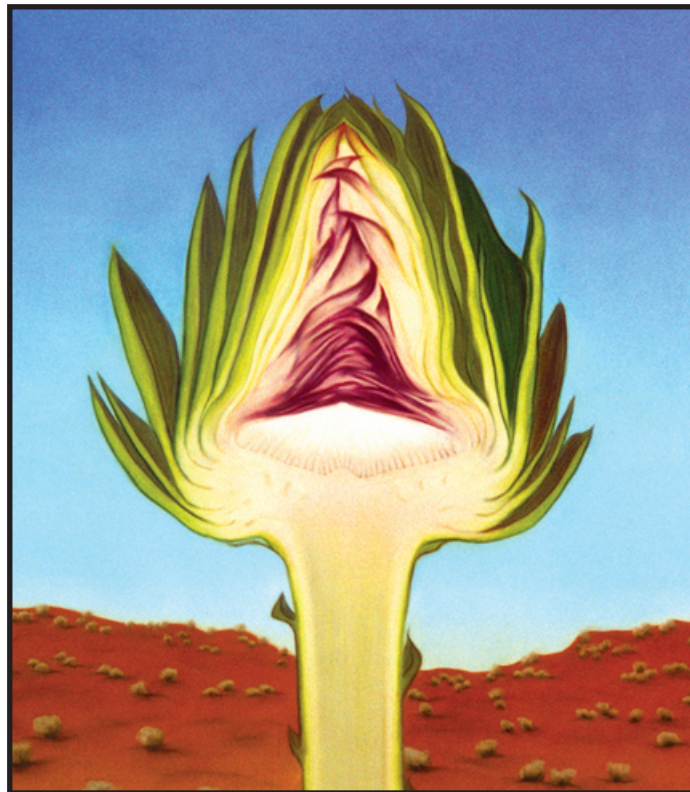
**Describe one of your own favourite paintings. Could you tell us why it happens to be one of your favourites?**

Artichoke II is one of my favourite pieces and it was a turning point for me. In this painting I tried to present both the physical and the spiritual aspects of the plant. To me it's a portrait in the same way someone might paint a portrait of a person. It's important that we maintain reverence for the things around us, but so easy to forget this in our commercial society. There's an entire universe inside a vegetable, a flower, a fruit. I think the painting was successful, and it opened the door to my Forbidden Fruit Series which followed shortly thereafter.

**Did you always know you would be an artist?**

Yes. When I was in grade school I told everyone I was going to be an artist when I grew up. But then in high school my father discouraged me. He thought I should pursue a career in a more lucrative field, such as information technology. I think he was worried I wouldn't survive as an artist. I half believed him and went into psychology thinking it would be a safer career than art, but now here I am! There's really no point in not doing what you love. When you believe in your calling, things fall into place and eventually you're successful. I should never have wavered.

*Negar Shirazi was born in Tehran just before the revolution, went to the international School of Geneva and later on to University of Lausanne. She majored in English Sociolinguistics. She also studied literature and journalism.*



"Artichoke II" by Riva Sweetrocket

sketch it out and know where I want it to go. The spontaneity I think comes in the process of trying to achieve my desired result. Other forces take over along the way and I discover I'm not as in control as I'd like to be. The fact that one ultimately can't control a work of art is simultaneously compelling and excruciating.

**What do you try to convey to your public? Do you often try to pass a message?**

Rather than conveying a message I'm more concerned with conveying a feeling. I'd rather have a viewer feel something than think something. That said, my paintings are open to interpretation. I want the viewer to decide what a piece means to them.

**Would you say your work carries a mystical message?**

Yes, for me it undoubtedly does. I hope viewers will find the spiritual component in my paintings regardless of their personal interpretation. I want them to look at a piece and be uplifted, to remember they are more than their body, their house, their country; to go beyond all those finite things, to where we are something more. The infinite is always accessible but we forget that so easily. My hope is that my work will be a vehicle that reconnects people with infinity.

**What colours do you use most often in your work? Is there a special reason why you use some colours or motifs more often than others?**