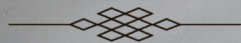




# TESSA TALLAKSON

*Tessa Tallakson is an Opelika, Alabama native with a gift for the arts. As a lover of nature, family, and knowledge, Tessa's upbringing in Opelika has helped her express her thoughts and find beauty in the world.*



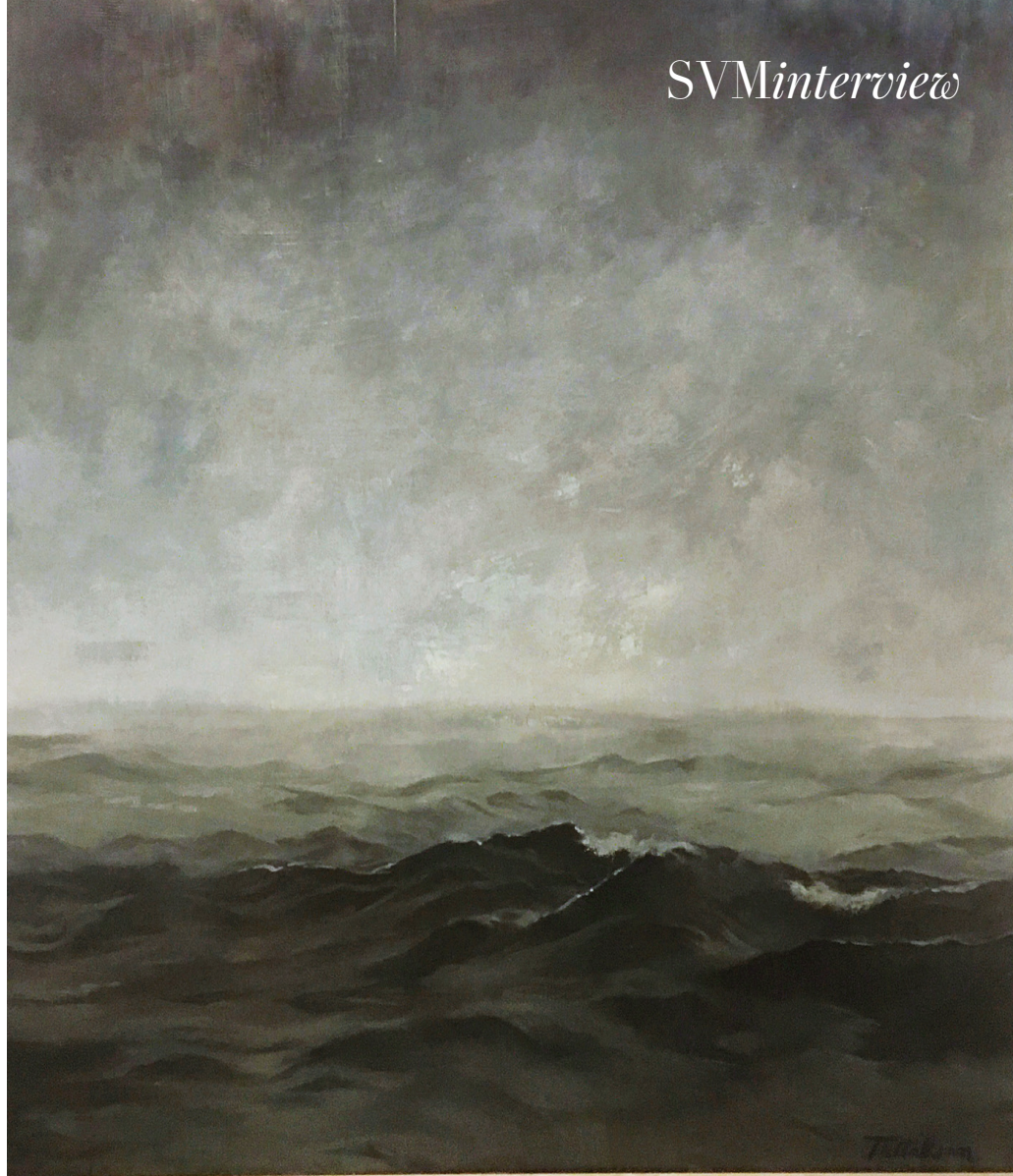
*By* R. CALIGARIS



**T**essa Tallakson is a young artist from Opelika, AL and is currently living in Philadelphia. She gave SVM an exclusive interview where she talks about her work, the influences she had at the beginning of her journey, and how having dyslexia shaped her as an artist.

**When did you first start painting? Were you born with a paint palette in hand, or did your interest in art develop over time?** Creating has been a constant part of my life. I spent most of my childhood building furniture for fairy houses in my back yard and drawing on stacks and stacks of printer paper. But it wasn't until high school, when I started working with my mentor Nan Cunningham, that I developed a love of painting, and decided to pursue it as a career.

**How much of your technical expertise do you attribute to art school, and how much would you say is self-taught?** I was self-taught for the most part until I went to art school, mainly because I was too stubborn to listen to art teachers. Art was my sacred thing, so I can't say that I took instruction well at all. When I finally realized that I wanted to be more technically skilled, I pursued artists to study under. I owe a lot to artists Elana Hagler and Nan Cunningham for being patient with me and encouraging me to go to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. At the Academy I have grown an incredible amount in a short time. It is a very rigorous program that is based in gaining a traditional skill set.



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**You have dyslexia, how does that shape you as an artist?** Being a kid with dyslexia is extremely hard. Being a kid who doesn't know she is dyslexic is even harder. Everything you have to do in school is tailored to kids who read well. I struggled with every aspect of school and carried an incredible amount of shame because of it. Art was the only thing I was good at, so I poured myself into it.

I wasn't very skilled but I was driven. I spent thousands of hours making things. That still informs who I am today. I am not someone who just had a lot of talent, but someone who is willing to work to get better.

**Do you have a favorite piece? Can you think of a piece that was particularly fun to work on?** My favorite piece changes with the day, I don't stay happy with things very long. For me every painting has a series of highs and lows emotionally. The beginning of every new painting is fun because of all the possibilities, but it always hits an awkward teenager phase where I look at it and want to throw it out the window. But I have to force myself to go back and work even when I would rather do something else. The final few strokes are very thrilling and it all seems worth it. I love what I do, but don't be fooled by the romantic idea of the art life, it's work, and like everything else there are good

and bad days.

**D**oes being from Opelika influence your creative process or provide inspiration in another way? Are there any other places that inspire you? Yes, it does influence me in ways I that didn't recognize until I moved to Philadelphia. Growing up in a small town I took for granted being able to hop in my car and get materials, or being able to drive somewhere to paint. I had studio space that I never could never have afforded in the city. Local artist and entrepreneur Lauren Duncan showed my work in her Auburn Gallery space, *The Local Market*. I never realized these things were unusual opportunities until I found myself on foot in a city where gallery representation is highly competitive. Basically, I had some working artist experiences before I went to art school.

I also never realized how blessed I was to live in a place like Opelika until I moved to Center City Philadelphia. Nature is a huge inspiration for me. Now I fully appreciate the part nature plays in my work. Things that we Southerners take for granted, like having a yard to enjoy, I now value more highly.



When I am in Alabama I am constantly collecting things to bring back to Philadelphia to paint: acorns, shells, and sticks. The ordinary becomes extraordinary when you no longer have it.

**W**hat artist inspires you to create the things you do? I have been looking a lot at the work of Emil Carlson lately. He was an American Impressionist painter. He used a beautiful variety of marks in his paintings, loose and tight brush strokes, crisp and soft edges, and thicker and thinner paint. His still lifes feel like he deeply observed the objects he painted, each one feels special, like an old friend whose flaws he knows and loves anyway. There is a quietness, and almost a reverence in his paintings that I admire.

**What is one thing the art world is missing today that is needed more of?** The art world predominantly focuses on art that is controversial or political. You only have to glance at the Instagram account of New York Magazine's Senior Art Critic Jerry Saltz to get a feel for what gets attention. In my opinion, we live in a time when more than ever we need to see and talk about art that encourages us, that gives us hope, and that allows us to see the world in a positive way.

The art world needs to be more open minded about work that usually it brushes off and labels as traditional, boring, and has been. There isn't too much "new" out there, so what's wrong with making art that is part of a long standing and valued history? There is value in all types of work, and I would love to see an art world where art that is more traditional is given equal consideration and representation as conceptual art.



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**What do you enjoy doing while not painting?** When I am not painting I am usually doing something outside. Spending time in nature helps me refill my creative tank. Some of my favorite days are spent hiking and exploring with my friends and family. Also, I am a big believer in hot tea, bubble baths, and candles, especially on cold winter days. **SVM**