

Paul W. McCormack interviewed by Jane Freeman



Paul, you work in both watercolor and oils, is there one you prefer above another? You began in watercolors, right?

I really don't have a preference when it comes to a choice of medium. Although, being primarily a portrait artist, my profession dictates more oils than watercolors. I did begin my career working solely in watercolor for about ten years, and then in 1990 I was commissioned to do a large family portrait that measured 74 x 102 inches. I was not going to attempt such a task in watercolor and that's when I picked up my oils again.

You have mentioned using a triad of colors for your flesh tones. Could you tell us about them and how you mix them to achieve such wonderful skin colors?

My basic flesh palette for watercolor consists of yellow ochre, rose madder genuine and cerulean blue. It is a basic red, yellow and blue theory focusing more on the transparent and opaque qualities of the pigments. Since cerulean blue is such an opaque pigment, it naturally tends to separate when mixed with the more transparent colors. This separation when worked in a wet into wet fashion will give you very minute spots of warm and cool colors in any given area, leaving the eye to visually mix them.

I begin mixing my flesh colors by simplifying my subject into a light, halftone and dark, creating a separate puddle of color for each value. Working 2 to 3 values lighter than my actual subject, (this gives allowance for subsequent layers of color) I then proceed to test these colors by making a large color swatch of my light value. I then apply my halftone mixture over half of that and finally my dark over a small section of the entire swatch. I will also use this swatch as a test strip for my next layers of color. When I am pleased with the 3 overall colors I will proceed to work from light to dark in a wet into wet fashion. One thing to keep in mind on this first process is that this is the overall flesh color or one may call it the local color. At this stage I am completely ignoring the more subtle colors,



such as the reds, violets, blues and green, these colors will be applied later.

Once my initial washes have been applied I will then begin to work wet onto dry applying the more subtle flesh colors. These subtleties are created with the same initial triad of colors with the exception of my reds where cadmium red light is needed in addition to the rose madder. For some of the cooler colors found in the flesh such as a green I will use the cerulean and the ochre, for a violet, cerulean and rose madder. By not introducing new tube colors your color will stay cleaner and you will less likely end up with mud. When it comes to my darker values I may need a few additional colors depending on my subject. Please note that these colors are substitutions and not in addition to the initial triad. To achieve a deeper shadow color I'll use Alizarin crimson instead of the rose madder. If I need to go darker still I substitute raw umber in place of the yellow ochre and for a really deep dark accent in the flesh, ivory black with cadmium red light.



I see you seem to do a pretty complete drawing before you start. How important is this do you feel to your final painting?

I can spend anywhere from a full day to a week on the drawing for a watercolor. For me it is the whole foundation of the work. Sometimes I will do my drawing directly on my watercolor paper and for more complex compositions I will work up a drawing with some simple values and transfer that to my surface.

Hair seems difficult to make it appear soft and believable. Could you tell us what you do to make it so real looking?

One of the keys to making hair believable is keeping it as simple as possible. Look for the larger patterns of light and dark in the hair and make sure they are drawn in correctly before you begin. In terms of painting technique, the hair is done mostly wet into wet working the pigment in the hairs direction as it is drying. This will imply strands of hair in a more subtle way while keeping the softness. I have seen too many times where someone attempts to paint individual strands of hair on a dry surface and it ends up looking like straw. Also keep in mind that if the hair is worked up too much it will detract from your focal point, which is the face.

Shadows can be so hard to make dark without making mud!!! Any suggestions? One of the most common reasons why someone ends up with mud is that they simply are trying to work with too many colors. As soon as two colors are mixed together the chroma or intensity of that color begins to diminish, by adding a third color even more so. This is one of the reasons why I keep my flesh palette fairly simple.

Paul, is there a secret to making a good composition in a portrait? Yours always seem so personal.

A good portrait should be a painting first and foremost, a pleasing image that anyone can appreciate. Composing a good composition in a portrait is relatively easy, simply because your main subject can assume so many different positions. For example, working with a ¾ figure you would have the head as your primary focal point and use of the hands as your secondary and tertiary points. If the hands are together and are seen as one unit the use of an object in the background or the simple allowance of space can be used as a tertiary focal point. Proper placement of these three points will usually allow the eye to flow through a painting quite nicely.

Do you work from life or photographs?

I work from both life and photographs. Most of my commissioned portraits are done from photos; simply because of the length of time it takes me to complete a portrait. Although, when I do work from photos I try to have the subject pose for a color study or quick sketch. Not so much as to have something to work from but simply to have the opportunity to study that person from life for a few hours. This way I am better equipped to distinguish between truth and lie when I am confined to a photograph as my reference.

I have seen you mention three separate palettes for one painting. Why is this and can you share the colors you use with us?



There may have been some confusion from my last article ("Artist's Magazine" April 2000) in regard to the palette. In using separate palettes, I am referring to my mixing trays. I use "Eldajon Palettes" which have 3 separate large mixing wells along with a dozen very small ones along one side. Since I begin each element of a painting with a light, halftone and dark, I find these palettes indispensable. I can use as many as fifteen palettes for one painting. I will have one for the flesh tones, one for the hair, the clothing, background elements and so on. Although not best suited for a classroom situation they work out very well in the studio. When I come back to a certain element in a painting a week or two later I will still have my initial colors

sitting in that particular palette.

Your final touch is dry brushing. That seems scary! How do you do this and keep it soft and not like just a bunch of lines.

I suppose my dry brush technique is not all that traditional in regard to the term. I am applying color in the same consistency of value as if I were applying a glaze. But instead I am using a number 2 round sable to apply the color. I fill my brush with color and pat it on a paper towel to remove some of the excess moisture. I then begin with very small hatch lines, which for the most part have a tendency to bleed together. If needed I will go back over the area and fill in any gaps or areas that may have been missed no matter how small. This process can be tedious at times, but I find the results to be very satisfying.

Can you give us some final words of encouragement? Many artists try to do a portrait or add figures to their landscapes. When we fail, we tend to never try it again because it seems so difficult.

To paint anything well you need to know and understand your subject to the full extent of your capabilities. If you are just beginning I highly recommend working from life to get a true understanding of the human form. If you set out by beginning with photos you will probably end up with false information in regard to anatomy, proportion and especially color. As a result this may give your work more of an illustrative look rather than being true to life. Painting a portrait or figure is really no different than creating a well executed still life painting. It is a matter of correct drawing, value, and color along with good technique. I know this is simply stated but for the most part I believe it to be the truth. A lot of artists feel very intimidated when it comes to painting a portrait or figure. As in art and in life to advance you must get over your fears.

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