

**WET AND FRESH:
A SURVEY OF CURRENT WATERCOLOR
IN WESTERN NEW YORK
APRIL 3—JUNE 27, 2004**



**BURCHFIELD PENNEY
ART CENTER**
at Buffalo State College

QUOTES

“To live with (John Singer) Sargent’s water-colours is to live with sunshine captured and held.”

Evan Charteris, Biographer

John Singer Sargent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

“A watercolorist’s problem is a rectangle of watercolor paper.”

Edgar A. Whitney, Artist

Complete Guide to Watercolor

“Watercolor is active even after I’ve lifted my brush.”

Zoltan Szabo, Artist

Artist at Work

“You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors.”

Winslow Homer, Artist

Winslow Homer Watercolors

“I’ve found watercolor an exciting and challenging way of painting...exciting because watercolor has an ‘action’ all its own. It moves, it crawls, and it fights back.”

John Pike, Artist

The Art and Technique of Watercolor Painting

“Watercolor shouldn’t behave, it simply shouldn’t.”

Andrew Wyeth, Artist

Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth

“...My preference for watercolor is a natural one. To paint in watercolor is as natural to me as using a pencil, and presents no more difficulties than a pencil; whereas I always feel self-conscious when I use oil.”

Charles E. Burchfield, Artist

American Artist

“H2OCLR”

Rita Argen Auerbach, Artist

New York State Department of Motor Vehicles License Plate Registry

Passionate Painters *by M. Stephen Doherty*

The way people identify themselves reveals something about both their self-image and the group of people with whom they most closely identify themselves. Ask strangers how to find them in a crowded airport or hotel lobby, for example, and you'll learn whether they consider their gender, clothing, stature, hair color, race, or weight to be their most obvious features. Ask artists what kind of work they do, and they will either describe a medium or subject matter that links them to others who feel bound together by one overriding creative concern. They will either give themselves a label based on the materials and techniques they use – say, printmaker, sculptor, or muralist; or they will accept a name based on the subject of their artwork – say, portraitist, still-life artist, or landscape painter.

In 25 years of asking me that question of artists, almost every person whose primary medium was watercolor has responded quickly by saying: “I’m a watercolorist;” or “I’m a watermedia artist.” The few who told me they were “painters” led me to believe they occasionally worked in oil; they were thinking about switching to another medium; or they were self-conscious about the stigma once associated with watercolor. Almost everyone serious about the medium was so excited by its creative potential, so pleased to share their interest with other, and so dedicated to promoting a greater appreciation that they proudly wore the label “watercolorist.”

The display of painting at the Burchfield- Penney Art Center goes a long way in explaining the unified spirit among watercolorists I’ve met. Some use the medium for its suitability in enriching detailed drawings, others find it appropriate for reproduction on the pages of books and magazines, some like the way it captures the spirit of nature, some enjoy its ability to record patterns of sunlight and shadow, and some believe it offers the most immediate pathway into the minds and hearts of human beings.

If it’s true that less really can be more, then it will be so in the hands of watercolorists who use a few tubes of paint, a brush, and a sheet of paper to express a lifetime of experiences. The Burchfield-Penney Art Center gives us an opportunity to know a few of those watercolorists much better. The quality of their art is equal to or better than any you’ll find in the rest of the country.

A locker full of hand-made clothes discovered after the death of Pat Fortunato’s husband’s grandmother became the inspiration for her first still-life painting and, eventually, an ongoing series of watercolors she calls “material pleasures.” That first painting unlocked

a personal history held by the tight stitches in the aprons, baptismal gowns, tablecloths, and clothing. The paintings that followed included fabrics that contributed a similar content as well as the pictorial elements necessary for strong compositions – color, texture, shape, line, and value. As the series grew over the past twenty years, Fortunato used more of her personal items as well as cloth that spoke of her “love for materials and the stories behind the fabrics.”

James Lipton usually begins his interviews with celebrities on the television program *Inside The Actors Studio* by reviewing their childhood experiences. Invariably, those accounts reveal a pattern that repeats through most of the actors’, directors’, singers’, and playwrights’ creative work. I’m sure the same would be true if he interviewed watercolorists. In most cases, the early influences of parents, siblings, teachers, and fellow artists are evident throughout an artist’s life. Certainly that is the case of Margaret M. Martin whose father was an architect who made watercolor rendering of his building, and whose mother taught art in the Buffalo school system. “My father’s approach was precise, with structural and layered washes; while my mother was free, direct, and colorful,” she remembers.

“I have a traditional approach to life and this is reflected in my choice of subject matter,” says E. Jane Stoddard, and with those few words she answers a question often posed by critics and art historians: To what extent is an artist’s work linked to their personality and life experience? Obviously, Stoddard weighs in with those who believe that the more one knows about an artist’s biography the greater the understanding of their artwork.

Stoddard reveals she was “unable to pursue a career in fashion illustration,” and, instead, became a medical assistant and office manager. But what may have once been a disappointed is now a liberation because Stoddard has the freedom to paint only those subjects that inspire her. “I do not paint for judges or potential buyers,” she explains. “I have to feel a certain passion for the subject I choose and this is the reason I rarely do a commission. Winning an award or selling a painting is the icing on the cake.”

“I am very interested in color and color interaction, and I often begin painting as a way of exploring that interest,” says Ani Hoover. She further explains that her exploration takes place while a sheet of vellum paper is positioned vertically so the water-soluble paint will “slide down to create an abstract pattern of translucent colors.” For the painting *Rainy Days*, she limited herself to transparent watercolor. Other works involve the use of watercolor, acrylic and other materials. “I use any paint as long as it has the color I need,” she comments. “That’s one of the reasons I use watercolor. The colors I can achieve are so vibrant and pure.”

Under the influence of Hans Hoffman and his ideas about the “push and pull” of color, Evette Slaughter explores the way texture, pattern, shape and color influence the sense of space in watermedia painting. Using combinations of gouache, acrylic, watercolor, and gesso, she builds collage compositions that present the “urban and natural landscape.”

“Joseph Orffeo goes his own way, pledges no allegiances, steals the fire,” wrote Anthony Bannon, former director of the Burchfield-Penny Art Center, in the catalog for an exhibition of Orffeo’s work at the museum in 1986. That fierce sense of independence still characterizes Orffeo’s work and, in part, explains his interest in watercolor. “The direction of my work has always been mine,” he wrote recently. “My paintings are very personal, and they express how I feel about the social and political environment as well as the landscape I see around me. I work primarily in watercolor, but I’m willing to use anything I need to express myself.”

Many curators, collectors, and critics rejected watercolor for not being as important or as assertive as oil painting. Orffeo and other independent-minded artists are attracted to watercolor *because* of the lack of popularity. As proud outsiders, they have no interest in following the crowd. In fact, a medium that is rejected by the would-be tastemakers becomes all the more attractive to artists who want their individual thoughts and ideas considered.

“I explore unpredictable form,” says Robert Holland in summarizing a wide range of interests and experiences that come together in his paintings. “Watercolor is my primary medium,” he adds, but his openness to the “unpredictable” often leads him into the use of gouache, casein, acrylic, colored pencil, and three-dimensional materials. Watercolor is the perfect medium for Holland because it changes appearance as quickly as the artist’s ideas and moods; and it allows the process to become just as important as the results. As he adds and subtracts elements of personal significance, the pictures suggest his concerns, including those about human dignity, balancing relationships to the earth, and the question of what nature and art are about.

Holland arrived at this approach to watercolor through a series of experiences, beginning as a child when he jumped off a kitchen counter and cut his hand on a watercolor tin. “It hurt like hell, but I found heaven on earth through watercolor,” he explains. Later he became interested in the inkblots used as part of the Rorschach test and studied the cultural and psychological interpretations of people’s responses to colors. Those explorations led to an understanding of how images could be used to express personal, cultural, environmental, and humanistic concerns.

Watercolor was not only the medium of choice for Catherine Norgren's renderings of the costume designs for the Vermont Stage's production of *Othello*, the very characteristics of the paints themselves – as handled by one of the greatest masters of the medium – became the inspiration for entire theatrical production. John Singer Sargent's watercolor *Spanish Fountain 1914* served as “a visual anchor” for Norgren as well as the play's director, set designer, sound technician, and lighting designer.

“Sargent's painting has the dark, stormy elements of the play, but it led us to an unexpectedly iridescent palette that was buoyant and volatile,” Norgren explains. “It reminded the production team to look at this play from its beginning, rather than from its ending: Othello and Desdemona begin as intensely happy newlyweds. Only familiarity with the script makes us anticipate the tragic ending.

“Sargent's watercolor inspired me to render in the same medium,” Norgren continues. “As I worked, I realized I had to use lightweight or light-reflective fabrics if they were to be dark in color; if I was going to use heavyweight brocades they had to be light values and brighter hues.”

Norgren often matches her drawing and painting materials to the source of visual inspiration when she creates her costume designs. “I work in many media: ink, markers, charcoal, graphite, pastel, acrylic, watercolor, collage – or all of those at once,” she explains. “The materials depend on the emotional tone of the playwright's text and the specific perspective from which the production team decides to share that text with an audience.”

In the sixty years he has been painting watercolors, Joseph A. Whalen has been affected by some of the greatest 20th century practitioners, many of whom he met through the pages of *American Artist* magazine. “My first influences were pictures by Charles E. Burchfield that probably appeared in the magazine in the 1940's,” he explains. “Ralph Avery taught me to paint in watercolor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and I was exposed to the work of Gordon Grant, Emil Grupe, Carl Peters, and John Pike. Later I became aware of Ogden Pleissner, Reginal March, and John Marin, whom I had the pleasure of meeting. My passion for watercolor grew through all those years of study and work, and I continue to love the medium.”

Many of the artists who influenced Whalen trained as illustrators and used watercolor to tell stories. Pleissner often recorded his hunting and fishing expeditions; and March turned his attention to urban dance halls, coffee shops, and street scenes. Storytelling was one of their chief motivations for painting. But at the same time, artists like Burchfield and Marin focused

on the energy and spirit embodied in both natural and man-made environments. To them, a tree or a building was simply a point of departure for creative exploration. With all those talents shaping the times, it was no wonder Whalen was constantly excited by the creative potential of watercolor.

As a testament to the enduring power and challenge of watercolor painting, Alma Slotkin is still thrilled when she splashes colors on a white sheet of paper, even after 50 years of doing so. But the thrill is tempered by the awareness that watercolor can exert its own influence on a developing picture. "I try to put feeling into my work," Slotkin says, "but I'm not always successful. Sometimes it happens and then it's worth the duds and I am spurred on."

Arthur E. Smith considers himself to be a Photo Realist because he works directly from photographs of his subjects and strives for precise details in his watercolors. "I project one or more slides on a screen and paint directly from it," he explains. "When I originally started watercolor years ago I would sit out-of-doors and paint until it was finished - an hour or two - or until the shadows or other conditions changed too much to continue. Now when I go exploring with my camera I try to snap scenes of subjects that just click with me. Then I try to recreate that mild pleasure in my painting. Part of my composition is accomplished with the camera, and part is accomplished by reorganization on the paper. The satisfaction I receive of creating an effect by organizing the elements of design (line, form, value, color, texture) while, at the same time, representing real objects is what I enjoy the most."

When Catherine Parker says her work is about "nature as metaphor," and that her painting is "based on my spiritual journey," one can easily see the connections to her famous father, Charles Burchfield. "I had one wonderful teacher at the Kansas City Art Institute who had an effect mostly because he believed in my potential," she says when pointing out that her father was also her most influential teacher. Indeed, there is a straight line connecting father and daughter in the way they transform nature into a setting for music, poetry, religion, and art. Just as Burchfield used watercolor to reveal the vibrations of sight, sound and spirit, Parker blends water-soluble materials into expressions of the mind, body, and soul.

While working as a framer and restorer at the Carl Bredemeir Gallery in Buffalo from 1934 to 1948, David Pratt was encouraged to take art classes at the Art Institutes of Buffalo. He focused on oil painting until he was stationed in the South Pacific with the U.S. Army where he found watercolor to be a more convenient medium for painting abstractions of the exotic locale. Like many men of his generation, Pratt returned home and struck a balance between his interest

in art and a need to make a living. He was a teacher and administrator at the Art Institute, and he worked as a carpenter's foreman for a Buffalo construction company. Through all those years, he created imaginative, fantastical landscapes.

"At times I have painted in response to political or environmental factors, but my main focus has always been the act of painting itself," Pratt explains. "I use whatever materials will serve to advance the painting itself. Those might include transparent watercolor, ink, conte crayon, graphite, or gouache. The objective is to create a work of art rather than to maintain some purity of medium. The final result is what is important to me. The subject matter is subordinate to the finished product. I allow the work itself to dictate the design, and I follow where the work itself leads. A painting is a thing in its own right. It doesn't have to be about any of the things other people paint. It takes on a life of its own."

Like many great American watercolorists, Thomas Aquinas Daly uses the medium to brood about subjects observed in the somber light of an overcast day, or in the moments just before dawn or immediately after dusk. Indeed, there is such a strong connection between Daly's work and the moody pictures of Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, and Andrew Wyeth that one wonders if there isn't something about the American experience in art that is profoundly melancholy. The people in their pictures sit alone or isolated from those around them, and they stare into the distance as if lost in thought or a state of depression. The artists' palettes of color rely on earth tones that, when scrubbed into the paper, become muted. Even when sunlight appears through a window or across a landscape, its glare is harsh and disturbing.

In the text of his self-published book, *The Art of Thomas Aquinas Daly: The Painting Season*, Daly indicates that his art "closely mirrors my life experience, the natural path for its study tracks the succession of the seasons." But while he shows people hunting, fishing, playing baseball, or shooting a bow and arrow, the figures seem to fade into the landscape, becoming one with the primal forces of nature. Just as Burchfield became increasingly interested in the spirit of the land and Wyeth in the passage of time, Daly become has concerned with the greater significance of his sporting subjects.

Like many others, Dianne Hickerson became involved in watercolor painting around the time she retired from her professional career. She finally had the time to pursue a childhood interest in art, and watercolor was the most accessible means to pursue that end. The materials and techniques were easy to understand, there were lots of people around to teach

her, and there were organizations to join that facilitated her education and social interaction. Moreover, Hickerson recognized a challenge in watercolor painting that would allow her to “actively pursue developing my artistic talents.”

After thirty-three years as an elementary school teacher, Hickerson became a student again in workshops with Wendy Gwartzman, Cheng-Khee Chee, Margaret M. Martin, Judy Treman, and Jean Grastorf. Eventually she found her own voice as an artist, making “clear vibrant colors and strong values the essence of my paintings,” she explains. “Each work is designed to create visual excitement and a mood of joy and wonder. This is often achieved by looking at the world close up, or by incorporating an element of surprise that delights the viewer.”

The long tradition of creating scientifically accurate watercolors of plant material takes on new meaning in the hands of artist, teacher, and society official Carol Woodin. At a time when reality is often a virtual, split-second, consumable experience, Woodin offers exacting pictures of nature created over hundreds of hours of study, drawing, and painting. “In the midst of a world filled with manufactured intrusions, it is almost impossible to focus on any one thing for any length of time,” she comments. “I’m able to do that by spending a great deal of time processing information. I invite the viewer to tune out all the distractions and hear the individual voice of the plant. At the same time, I remind people that even though new plants are being discovered every day, they are being lost at an even greater pace.” For nearly twenty years, Walter R. Garver has informed and inspired thousands of artists through his regular columns in *The Artist’s Magazine* and *Watercolor Magic* magazines. He has given generously of his knowledge and love of art in articles about drawing or painting techniques, as well as paintings by the Old Masters. That love began more than fifty years ago when Garver studied with Charles Burchfield and continued through his career as a graphic artist, photographer, and high school art teacher.

A concern for detail in natural and man-made objects has always characterized Lorna Berlin’s watercolors, although the form of expression has changed dramatically over thirty years of painting with the medium. In her most recent work, she explores the abstract relationships between discarded materials, taking her pictures to a level of finish that suggests she is portraying specific piles of construction debris. The light glance off the surfaces of each layer of wood and metal, taking the viewer deeper into a cool, distant space. The shapes seem to move forward and backward, gradually spinning beyond the borders of the rectangular paper.

Martin Pasco, the artist commissioned by Cannon Design, also focuses on details within stacks of construction materials, yet he holds them in a way that brings an imagined

structure to life. His architectural renderings are painted with the same sense of abstract organization, but the organization is intended to bring a series of two-dimensional designs into the third dimension.

Charles Clough has little interest in creating an illusion of depth or dimension in his watercolors as he prefers to deal with pure abstraction that celebrates the integrity of the picture plane. Color, form, and gesture can be enjoyed on their own terms and not as they might be used to create an approximation of reality. There is no need to vary the weight, movement, intensity, or balance of those forms or to subvert one gesture to another. The final painting is, in a sense, a display of handwriting that can be appreciated as evidence of the artist's unique character.

Philip Burke wants us to know the identity of his subject, yet the paint itself is in some ways more important than the politician or celebrity he depicts. We are as conscious of the artist's hand as it quickly moves watercolor across the paper in a gestured motion as we are the identity of the person. Burke takes full advantage of the medium's natural tendency toward immediate, colorful, and calligraphic brush marks.

Following yet another set of traditions, Yenfen Huang layers delicate washes of pigment to capture the subtlety and detail of nature in a decidedly graphic style. We sense the artist's peaceful state of mind as she considers every choice of color, every stroke of the brush, every element within the composition.

In sum total, the work included in this exhibition makes it clear why practitioners are so wildly excited about watercolor, and why I consider this particular group to be outstanding examples of both the diversity and quality of contemporary watercolor painting.

M. Stephen Doherty

Editor-in-chief of *American Artist*, *Watercolor*, and *American Artist DRAWING* magazines.