



artist daily  
*presents*

# WATERCOLOR LESSONS ON DEPTH AND LUMINOSITY

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Watercolor Painting  
Techniques from  
Artist Daily

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# Skin-tones & Colors that Shine

ALI CAVANAUGH DISCOVERED  
WAYS & MEANS TO CREATE  
RICHLY NUANCED FIGURE  
PAINTINGS IN WATERCOLOR.

by **Lynne Moss Perricelli**

**A**li Cavanaugh prefers watercolor as a medium, but her approach is more like that of an oil painter. Building up multiple layers, slowly blending the paints to the desired color and value, she achieves a remarkable depth and luminosity, especially in the skin tones. **Such a labor-intensive approach and an unconventional application of watermedia requires a special surface, which Cavanaugh discovered in Ampersand's Aquabord, a plaster panel cradled in birch plywood and covered with kaolin clay.** The artist describes the surface as “pebbly,” conveying a rich texture that holds the paint well. Best of all, the wet surface allows the paint to remain workable over a long period of time.



ABOVE

Falling Through  
Your Redolence  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 22.  
Courtesy Bering & James  
Gallery, Houston, Texas.



Perfected Through a Fall  
2008, watercolor, 50 x 40.  
Collection the artist.

Cavanaugh begins any new work by first arranging a photo shoot. Her models are typically her daughter and nieces, and she dresses them in clothes from her own collection of vintage fabrics. “The magic for me is in dressing the figure and doing the photo shoot,” Cavanaugh says. “The creative part of my process is mostly in capturing the figure in a pose that is emotional.” She spends a great deal of time deciding

what the figure will wear. “The clothing sets the tone, but more important it allows me to bring together the two things I love the most: fabric and the figure. Painting the fabric and the patterns motivates me.”

**Setting up her digital camera on a tripod, she takes some 200 to 300 photos. She engages the model in conversation to find a natural, compelling pose.** She then uploads the

photos to her computer, where she can view and manipulate them with Photoshop software. “I choose one photo or a couple of photos and piece them together,” the artist describes. “I eliminate some elements, change everything to black and white. I cut and paste from other photos, keeping everything on the screen.”

Once she has determined the composition, she selects a panel and



I Remember How  
It Used To Be  
2007, watercolor,  
20 x 16. Private collection.



**RIGHT**  
Why Not  
2008, watercolor, 14 x 18.  
Collection the artist.

**BELOW**  
Twice  
2007, watercolor, 12 x 12.  
Private collection.



makes a light graphite drawing. She then wets the surface and begins painting. The graphite dissolves when the water and pigment contact the surface. “I have no set formula,” she explains. “Every painting starts out in its own way. Sometimes I work from light to dark, sometimes I don’t.” Cavanaugh likens her process to egg tempera in that she uses multiple tiny strokes to build up the color in layers, and although she is responding to the work as it progresses, the process is slow and meticulous. **She typically begins with a 1” sable flat to lay in the background areas, then uses smaller brushes, down to a .2.** “I go through about four brushes per painting,” she notes. “The sandpaperlike texture of the surface wears out the brushes quickly.”

**She arranges her paints—by Daniel Smith, for the most part—on ceramic tiles in clusters of colors: one for skin, one for hair, and one for fabric.** After spraying the paints to keep them wet, she adds a lot of water to the pigment and mixes some color on the palette.





Putting on  
Perfection  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 22.  
Collection the artist.

She allows each layer of paint to dry before she applies the next, which prevents the previous layers from lifting. Her skin tones typically consist of varying degrees of the following paints: yellow ochre, cadmium red light, cadmium red medium, a variety of purples, sap green, burnt umber,

burnt sienna, and Van Dyck brown. In painting the fabrics, she layers complementary colors to build depth. For gray fabrics, she combines lamp black, Payne's gray, indigo, and cerulean blue.

As Cavanaugh layers the paint, she reworks certain areas as necessary by

lifting out the paint with clean brushes and paper towels. She also pulls out highlights and makes other adjustments. "I don't know how to explain it other than to say I just go into it and layer the paint. I just keep working until it looks good," she says. A painting generally consists of up to

**RIGHT**

A Boat for You Within My Arms  
2008, watercolor, 30 x 30. Courtesy Wally  
Workman Gallery, Austin, Texas.

**BELOW**

6, 7, 8, 9, 10  
2008, watercolor, 16 x 20. Collection the artist.

50 layers. When a piece is complete, Cavanaugh applies three to four coats of acrylic matte spray to seal and protect the surface, using three coats of Minwax Polycrylic on the plywood sides. She hangs the small pieces with a sawtooth hanger on the back of the cradle and rubber bumpers at the bottom so that the piece hangs perfectly against the wall. Larger pieces require D rings to the back of the cradle and a wire for hanging.

Cavanaugh believes her interest in the figure has its origin in her hearing loss, which resulted from spinal meningitis when she was 15 months old. “I have a small amount of hearing in one ear,” she says, “but out in the world I have to depend on reading lips and body language. This has made me very attuned to others, to the unspoken language of the figure. I love the structure of the figure, but the unseen dimension of the figure is what strikes me so deeply.” She began painting commissioned portraits in high school, and even in college, she always returned to the figure. In 2004, after the birth of her daughter, the figure took on even greater meaning as she observed her daughter’s growth and how it made her think of her own childhood. Creating images of girls has presented “an entry point into my own past experiences,” she says.

The artist, even since art school, has been known for her use of negative space. “I overstate the negative space,” she says, “and I suppose it’s because it quiets the composition. It creates a silence. Maybe it’s because of my hearing loss. Maybe it’s just to isolate the





**ABOVE**  
Separate My Thought  
From Yours  
2008, watercolor, 18 x 28.  
Collection the artist.

**LEFT**  
Within a Graceful  
Melody  
2007, watercolor, 30 x 30.  
Private collection.



figure, just like when someone is speaking to me I have to focus completely on that person.”

Recently Cavanaugh has embarked on a new series of time-lapse images. So far she has four sets, still in the early stages, in which she shows the same figure at different points in time. She would also like to sew her own clothes for the photo shoots. “I’m limited right now to the clothes in the stores,” she explains, “but I would like to get into cutting up clothes and resewing them. I love inside-out clothes—the seams, the threads. I want to play around with them and be more creative with the fabric.”

There’s no doubt this artist will find a way to make both the process and the paintings uniquely her own. That’s what she’s always done. ■



# DEMONSTRATION: DOUBTFUL



1

## Step 1

The artist first made a light graphite sketch to establish the composition.



2

## Step 2

Beginning with the bandana, the artist began laying small strokes of color, using a combination of lamp black, Prussian blue, cerulean blue, burnt umber, and sepia. To convey a sense of depth, she worked from light to dark.



3

## Step 3

The artist gradually built up the layers of paint in small strokes.

## Step 4

Cavanaugh next developed the figure's dress, using a combination of French ultramarine, indigo, and burnt umber. Again she worked from light to dark.



4

## Step 5

To create depth in the skin tones, the artist first laid in the darkest darks, using raw sienna and burnt umber. She then used many reds, oranges, and yellows in thin, watery layers. She worked slowly to build the layers evenly and achieve a luminous effect.



5



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:  
Doubtful  
2007, watercolor, 20 x 16.  
Collection the artist.