

Sheer Realism

Whether you work in watercolor or oil, here's how to give your portraits rich, lifelike fleshtones.

By Paul W. McCormack

I've always taken my artistic inspirations from the expressions of the human form—the ever-changing countenance of a friend's face in conversation, the blank stare of a stranger on a subway, or the poetic gesture of a stance. Although I work in both watercolor and oil (see The Oil Alternative sidebar), I began my career nearly 20 years ago by painting the figure in watercolor, a medium that lends itself beautifully to re-creating the translucent quality of flesh. By working transparently and using three basic techniques—wet-into-wet, glazing and drybrush—I've developed a method that gives my portraits a look unlike conventional watercolors. This approach can be very time-consuming: I often spend 80 hours or more painting a simple head and shoulders. But the effort is worth it. The results of this process can prove quite sublime. Here's how it works.



Keys to Luminosity

I began Silent Pattern (watercolor, 50x38) by reducing my subject into light, halftone and dark values. Then I built up the luminous colors with wet-into-wet, glazing and drybrush techniques.

Laying the Foundation

First and foremost, a good portrait should have a timeless quality. It should evoke emotion and reveal the sitter's personality. And although a good likeness is critical, I also try to create an aesthetically pleasing piece of art that anyone can appreciate, regardless of whether or not they know the sitter. Because watercolor is an unforgiving medium, I begin my watercolor portraits with a fairly tight line drawing. This drawing usually takes about a day to complete, and includes the shadow planes and the exact placement of the highlights. I primarily use Arches 140-lb. cold-pressed paper, and I stretch it before use

by soaking it in water for about five minutes, then staple it to a 1/4-inch thick sheet of plywood.

When the paper dries I transfer the drawing to my working surface. Then I'm ready to start laying in color. I always begin with my center of interest—usually the face. All of the other colors are based on my focal point. In this initial stage, I simplify my subject into light, halftone and dark values. I begin each element in my painting in this way, using separate color mixtures and mixing palettes for the flesh, hair, fabrics and backgrounds.

In most of my portraits I use natural light from a north-facing window. North light gives you cool lights and warmer halftones and darks. I start my fleshtones by mixing lights and darks with my standard fleshtone palette of yellow ochre, cerulean blue and rose madder genuine. The opaque and transparent qualities of these particular pigments tend to separate on the paper's surface, causing a fragmentation—the colors actually separate, leaving spots of warm and cool colors in any given area of the flesh. With the later addition of cadmium red light, I find these colors indispensable when it comes to painting the figure.

Next I make a test swatch of these colors on a separate sheet of paper. Working wet-into-wet, I apply a large wash of the lightest value, then cover half of that with my halftone mixture. Finally, I cover half of my halftone mixture with my dark mixture. Since I follow the watercolor tradition of working light to dark, I always begin flesh areas two or three values lighter than they are in my actual subject. Since I'll eventually be working with several layers of glazes, I save this color swatch to use as a testing ground for subsequent washes of color.

Working Wet-Into-Wet

Now I'm ready to apply the first of my three key techniques—wet-into-wet. I use a large round sable brush and clean water to wet all of the flesh areas. I work around the eyes, lips and any highlights that call for hard edges. I then cover the flesh areas with an initial light wash, this time working around any highlights that need soft edges. While this wash is still wet, I lay down my halftone color, followed by my darks. If the surface of the paper begins to dry during this process, I stop working and let it dry completely. Then I rewet it with clean water and continue.

When painting wet-into-wet, I find it's helpful to work as quickly as possible. I lay in my first wash, then leave it alone rather than playing around with it. For more control, I load my brush with color, then pat it on a paper towel. This absorbs a lot of the water and keeps my washes from spreading too much.

Once these initial fleshtones are in place, I use the same approach to apply color to all of the other elements in the painting. But unlike the areas of flesh, I wash in the other elements at their correct value. This allows me to use these elements as reference points when I bring up color in the face and flesh areas. In this phase, I'm very conscious of my edges. For example, when I'm working the background color wet-into-wet, I drag some of the color into the figure while lifting some of the color, thus creating a soft edge.

After indicating all of my large areas of color, I begin to work on the features. As I paint the eyes and mouth, I once again pay particular attention to the edges. I paint the eyes wet-into-wet to ensure that the iris has a soft look, then use a wet-onto-dry approach to

paint the upper lash, softening the bottom edge into the eye, which creates the illusion that the lid and the lash are coming up and over the eye. Then I move to the mouth using the same approach that I use for flesh, with one important exception—I wet the mouth well beyond its outer edges to give the lips a soft appearance. Finally, I use a warm reddish color to define the line of the eyelid, the nostrils and the separation of the lips. This is important: Using a cool color in these areas deadens the flesh.

Glazing

With my working surface completely covered, I switch to glazing and continue to develop the fleshtones. This essentially means that I'm working wet-onto-dry. To make sure my glazes give the look I want, I test the first color on my initial fleshtone swatch. When I'm certain of the color and value, I load my brush and apply the glaze to the painting. While this is still wet, I rinse my brush and pat it with a paper towel. I then quickly work the damp brush up to the edges of the glaze to soften them. I'm very careful here—if the brush is too wet, it will cause a backwash into the glaze, leaving watermarks. Conversely, if the brush is too dry, or if I work too slowly, the edge won't be soft enough.

As I apply the color, I'm very aware of the values and subtle color changes. I begin to look beyond the overall tone of the flesh to work up the reds, greens, violets and any other subtleties of color that I may see. The reds in the face are found primarily where flesh meets bone and cartilage, such as the cheekbones, the bridge of the nose, the chin and the ears. The cooler colors, such as the greens, blues and violets are found more in the hollows of the face, the lower part of the face and the hollow of the eye socket, which lies directly under the bag beneath the eye.

Using a round sable, I start to model the features by applying thin layers of color, being careful to let each layer dry before adding the next. After I establish all of the color nuances, I glaze the figure with my overall fleshtones, making any corrections in temperature and bringing the values up to a more finished state.

I can usually apply several layers of glazes before the surface of the paper becomes disturbed and I begin picking up the underlying color. Then I'm ready to move to my third and final technique.

Drybrush

The drybrush technique gives my fleshtones their soft, smooth look. I use small, delicate, transparent strokes of almost-pure color to create a rich, vibrant appearance. I'm very particular in my brush choice for this technique: I use a Winsor & Newton series 7, round No. 2 sable. Still working transparently and testing my color as I did when applying glazes, I load my brush with color, pat out the moisture with a paper towel, and begin to hatch very delicate lines. Although these lines tend to blend, once you become familiar with this technique, you can control it almost as if you were working with a pencil. Often, I rework areas of the face by applying clean water with a round sable and using a tissue to gently lift color. I then correct the area with glazes and/or drybrush. Similarly, I can also rework edges to be harder or softer. With the combination of these techniques, any flaws in my washes or glazes disappear.

I'm very careful not to overwork my portraits. If you work layer upon layer, areas can become opaque, and you'll lose that wonderful transparent glow. When I look at the painting and say to myself, "there's nothing I can do to make it better," the painting's complete.

My approach to watercolor portraits requires patience and work. But it's worth it. By using the three key techniques, you can create luminous fleshtones that both defy the usual look of watercolor and captivate viewers.

Demonstration*

**Additional images have been added which did not appear in the original article. Open the "Sheer Realism Demo" folder with any photo software to view all the demonstration steps in a high-resolution format.*

Figure 1



Figure 2



1. Creating the Framework

Starting with a fairly tight pencil drawing, I indicated the shadow areas and the highlights.

2. Establishing Color

I masked the patterns in the fabric and the background. Then I mixed three values of my fleshtones and applied them to the figure. Next I created separate color mixtures for the hair, fabric and background, and started working wet-into-wet in those areas.

3. Developing the Features

I removed the masking and developed the background and the fabric. Then I painted the eyes and mouth.

4. Glazing the Fleshtones

Working wet-onto-dry, I indicated the hair comb and the earring. Then I glazed the subtle color changes in the flesh, working them toward their correct value.

Figure 3



Figure 3a



Figure 4



Figure 4a



5. Building Luminosity

I completed Expectations (watercolor, 37x23) by using a drybrush technique to rework edges and develop the luminosity of the skin.

Figure 5



Figure 5a



About the Artist

Paul W. McCormack received his art training at the duCret School of the Arts in Plainfield, New Jersey. He's currently a portrait instructor at that school, as well as two other New Jersey institutions: The New Jersey Center for Visual Arts (Summit) and Somerset Art Association (Bedminster). McCormack is a member of the Hudson Valley Art Association, the New Jersey Watercolor Society and Allied Artists of America. His paintings have won many awards in juried exhibitions. McCormack is represented by Portraits Inc. (New York City) and Swain Galleries (Plainfield, New Jersey). His work also appears in Splash VI (North Light Books).

The Oil Alternative

My approach for creating oil portraits shares several similarities with my watercolor work. For example, I use a similar palette for both—yellow ochre, cerulean blue and alizarin crimson (substituted for rose madder), to which I may add cadmium red and ivory black. However, there are four important differences: In oil, I deal more with shapes than lines, I work dark to light, my color applications are opaque rather than transparent and I don't use the progression of three key techniques that I use for watercolor.



Doubling the Image

Becky (oil, 37x25) actually became something of a double portrait. I painted the reflection from a slightly different angle so that more of the girl's face would be visible, making for a stronger overall composition.

I work on toned canvas—usually raw umber thinned with turpentine, which provides a solid neutral tone—and I start each portrait by doing a drawing with ivory black.

As with my watercolors, I start adding color in the face, which I block in with four values. I start by mixing my shadow color, then take a portion of this mixture and lighten it with white to create my halftone. Next I lighten a portion of the halftone mixture to produce my lights. Finally, I adjust a portion of the light mixture to produce my highlights. My brushes are all bristle filberts and I usually start the head using a different No. 6 for each tone. This keeps the color clean and allows me to work the tones together.

Once I feel the shape of the head is pretty much correct, I go in and add the subtle color changes in the face. If, for instance, I need to add a reddish tone to a halftone in the cheek area, I may add some cadmium red and alizarin crimson to my halftone mixture. My next step is to establish all of the large color spots, such as the hair, the garment and the background. I may not complete the background or garment, but I want to have some of those colors on my canvas to help me make necessary comparisons. Finally, I block in the eyes and mouth. I block in everything fairly soft edged, because it's easier to add a hard edge than to soften an edge.

Developing the Painting

I let the block-in dry a day or two, then start the next day's work by oiling out my canvas with a mixture of stand oil and turpentine, then pat or wipe off the excess with a clean cotton cloth. This re-establishes the colors as they look when they were wet.

My first task is to model the head. I work section by section. For example, I may start with the forehead and then work my way down one side of the face. When the head is modeled, I go back to the focal point of the face—90 percent of the time that's the eyes. I start bringing up the eyes with all of the details and subtle color changes. Then I work outward from the center of the eye, making any necessary adjustments. The things that make the eye realistic are those elements around it, such as upper and lower lids, the brow and the cheeks.



Color It Opaque

As with all of my oil portraits, I used opaque applications of color for Karen (oil, 36x25). Throughout the painting process, I keep the face more developed than the other areas so that the piece always has somewhat of a finished look.

It usually takes me a month to do a head and shoulders. But at the end of each day, I want the painting to have something of a finished look, so the face is always more developed than the surrounding areas. Although my initial colors—and particularly my shadows and darks—are very thin, I use opaque applications throughout. I develop the painting by building up thicker and heavier paint in my lights. I don't glaze; I adjust these colors purely by mixing color and applying it to my canvas. In general, I probably repaint the head four times. In certain areas of the face—such as the features and any other areas I need to bring up—I may use as many as 10 layers before the painting is complete.

**This article is reprinted from the
April 2000 issue of The Artist's Magazine,
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