

A Little Humor Goes a Long Way

Painting “Testing Larry’s Theory”

The backstory:

While watching a local TV station interview of a well-known regional artist, something he said caught my attention. He was telling the interviewer how he had been painting this series of southwest figurative work and nothing was selling, and he finally decided to add a feather to the figure. That painting sold, so the next one got a feather and it also sold. He said he finally figured that “If they’re wearing a feather it will sell”. That statement was the inspiration for this painting, called “Testing Larry’s Theory”.

I set my still life up with two of the penguins from my collection, plus a bell pepper, crookneck squash, a pear (all wearing feathers), and assorted other items, including a ripped out page from an art magazine with an ad in it featuring one of Larry Lee’s paintings. I wrote his statement across the top of the ad.

The first step was drawing the still life onto my watercolor paper. You can see my pencil lines in the unpainted areas below. The second step was painting in major shadow areas using a range of grays. I also used a permanent black ink for the writing on the ad.



In the second photo, above, I’ve put in the first large wash of color on the background fabric, and painted several washes on the pear. Notice how the gray underpainting shows through the subsequent washes, helping to build form in the fabric and pear (and that will work the same way as I complete other objects in the painting).

When I paint in watercolor, I work from general to specific, and from light to dark, building color and value with additional washes. The exception to this: Very early on, I like to paint in some area that includes the lightest light (generally unpainted paper) and the darkest dark. In this case—that area was in the ad of Larry’s painting, so I completed that area first. (see the next photo on the following page) Having the darkest dark and lightest light helps me gauge the other values and intensities of color as I work all over the painting.





Left above: I've put the first color washes on the bell pepper and crookneck squash, and the ad for Lawrence Lee is finished as well. I've also begun painting some of the feathers.

Left below: The first red wash goes on the bell pepper, leaving some of the previous dried wash showing for highlights.

Below: I've begun to work on the two penguins, and have spattered paint on the fabric in the bottom third of the painting to "texture" it more. The bell pepper and crookneck squash get additional layers of paint and the feathers are finished. Notice



that the first layer of paint put on the small penguin is blue, even though it eventually will be black. I'll leave some of this blue showing for highlights when I paint the next layer.





Left above: The turquoise stripes are added to the coral colored fabric in the back, more layers of paint are added to the penguins as well as the rolls of ribbon.

Left below: Now I'm stenciling a diamond pattern onto the background fabric, using wax paper masks held in place with weights to keep the spattered on watercolor from going anywhere I don't want it. For this pattern, I used a ready-made piece of "lace" fabric, spray painted with clear acrylic so that the paint wouldn't just soak into the lace as I spattered it. This is just one kind of stenciling I do—more often I hand cut the stencils that I use from heavy-weight waxed stencil paper.

Below right: This is the finished painting. Last steps: paint the ribbon turquoise, using a variety of washes to make it appear shiny. I also added a red stripe to the background fabric. When the painting is completely dry I go over it with a plastic eraser to remove any stray pencil marks.

P.S. Perhaps Larry's Theory is correct—this painting sold the first time I exhibited it.

Testing Larry's Theory, watercolor on paper, image 30 x 22 inches,
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