

Imaginative Journey

A Dangerous Crossing (22x30) was a result of using my imagination to find analogies as I worked. While painting, the blue fabric began to look like a river, so I added the scissors to humorously represent shark's teeth. The metaphor goes even beyond what you see—to play down the pigs, I made the patterns busy, and the danger was making them too active. I kept overkill at bay by limiting the number of colors used.



Limber Up Your Imagination

Use these exercises to pump up your creative power and find new painting ideas.

BY ELLEN FOUNTAIN

When people first see my landscape paintings, they're often surprised to find painted folds of fabric doubling as hills, roads and mountains, and to see animals interacting with this "fabricscape." That these landscapes are different is the fun of it. And that they're formed from the ordinary accouterments of my life is significant. I like to offer the surprise of seeing a common object in a new way, and I want my work to elicit smiles or laughs, and generate an "a-ha!" when someone gets the whole idea. As a result, many people have said to me, "I just don't have your imagination." But that's not a realistic statement, because imagination isn't something that some people have and others don't. It's really a process of combining thinking with observation, and it's something that anyone can develop.

But imaginations are just like bodies—they need regular exercise in order to stay in good working shape. Exercising your imagination means that you listen to it often, and learn to take fleeting ideas and develop them into paintings. If you do it often, you'll be able to "file" those fleeting ideas and mull them over long enough to see if they'll lead you anywhere. The payoff for regular use is an effortless and endless supply of ideas whenever we want them. Here are a few exercises that will limber up a stiff imagination.

● **Visualize/Fantasize—**Find a quiet spot, shut your eyes, and call up an image of something you know very well, perhaps your cat. Take the time to let the image form

clearly in your mind. Then change the image—make the cat another color (how about purple?), give it wings and watch it fly, add another tail, and so on. You may have difficulty with this at first, but persevere. Begin with five minutes—set a timer (one that doesn't tick too loudly is best) so you don't have to watch the clock.

● **Play With Your Ideas—**As adults, we tend to reject ideas that fall outside the boundaries of what we define as "normal." Imagination can and should help you stretch those boundaries. When I begin setting up a painting, even if I have a specific idea in mind, I try to cultivate a "playful" attitude, and stay receptive to new ideas. I add and subtract objects and rearrange things, all the while responding to what is happening visually and also what's happening to the subject (sometimes a visual change also shifts metaphors or symbols). I try not to censor anything during this play period. I just keep working with the possibilities until everything falls into place. Flexibility here is important. At times, I've started out with one idea and ended up with something completely different.

● **Look for Analogies/Visual Metaphors—**This is one of my favorite approaches to beginning a new piece. Finding connections between objects that seem totally unrelated is a real imagination-stretcher. You might try beginning with a design element (a color, shape, line, value or texture), then try to find things in your subject that echo it.

● **Combine Opposites—**If you're dealing with ordinary subject matter, one way to make it more unusual is to imagine it in terms of opposites. Again, you might begin

with your design elements. A banana is normally yellow, smooth, satin-finished and it's length is longer than its diameter. Imagine, for example, that it's violet, rough, dull and fatter than it is long.

By using these four techniques often, I'm able to see artistic possibilities nearly anywhere. I "visualize" all the time. I've "painted in my head" while driving, cooking, cleaning and nearly any other situation. Likewise, looking for analogies/metaphors and oppositions has become almost second nature.

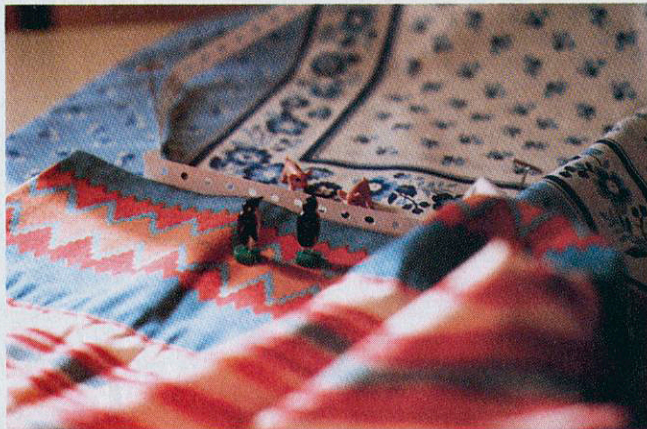
IDEAS AT WORK

Using these imagination-builders is what gave me the fabricscape idea. One day, I was cutting out several garments and had a stack of various fabrics on the table. I was interrupted, and needed the space on the table, so I shoved the pile of fabrics back up against the wall. The next time I looked at them I thought, "that looks sort of like little mountains and hills." That was the critical moment. Everyone has those fleeting imaginative thoughts, but most of the time they're rejected so quickly that they never have the chance to blossom into a full-fledged idea, especially if they occur at times other than when we're making art. But here, I held onto the idea, turning it into an entire series of paintings.

It's not only during this "launching" stage that I call on my imagination. I use it all the way through the painting process—sometimes relying more heavily on observation, and other times I'm more concerned with thinking and creating. To begin each painting, I set up the fabric and the characters not only to satisfy my creative ideas, but also to work compositionally. I arrange the

The Real Setup

This is one of the reference photos I took for *Border Clash* (22x30), and you can see that I use it only as a starting point for the painting. I wanted the clash between the border fabrics to symbolize a larger cultural clash (particularly interesting to me, living close to the Mexican border). The computer paper suggests a high-tech fence, while its holes allow flow-through from both sides.

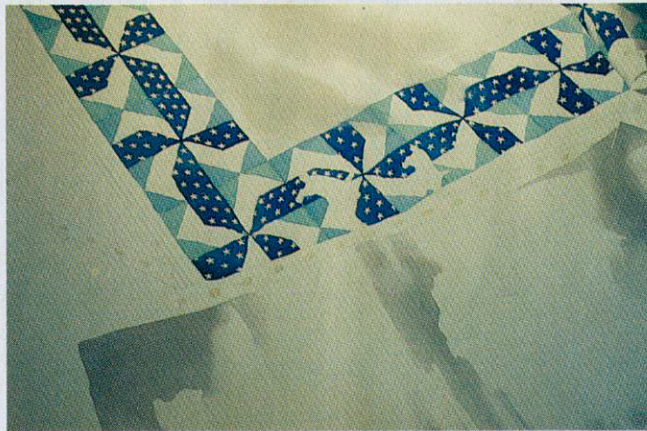


Step Two: Making Patterns

I stamped in the red "mom" print (or "wow") with a design cut from the end of a Pink Pearl eraser. I used wax paper to mask off the areas I didn't want to stamp. Wax paper is handy because I can place it over the design, and cut out the parts I want to stamp with a graphic arts knife (with a light touch, the blade won't harm the painting). Then, I painted the lavender area, leaving the pie-shaped areas white.

Step One: The Pattern and the Shadows

After I drew the basic contours of the scene onto 140-lb. watercolor paper, I determined which areas would remain white. To preserve the white of the stars, I painted them with liquid masking. Then, I painted the blue areas. I gave this pattern a strong red-white-blue scheme to further the symbolism in the painting. Then, I added the shadow areas with a gray made of staining colors—alizarin crimson and thalo green. These staining colors won't lift readily when glazed over.

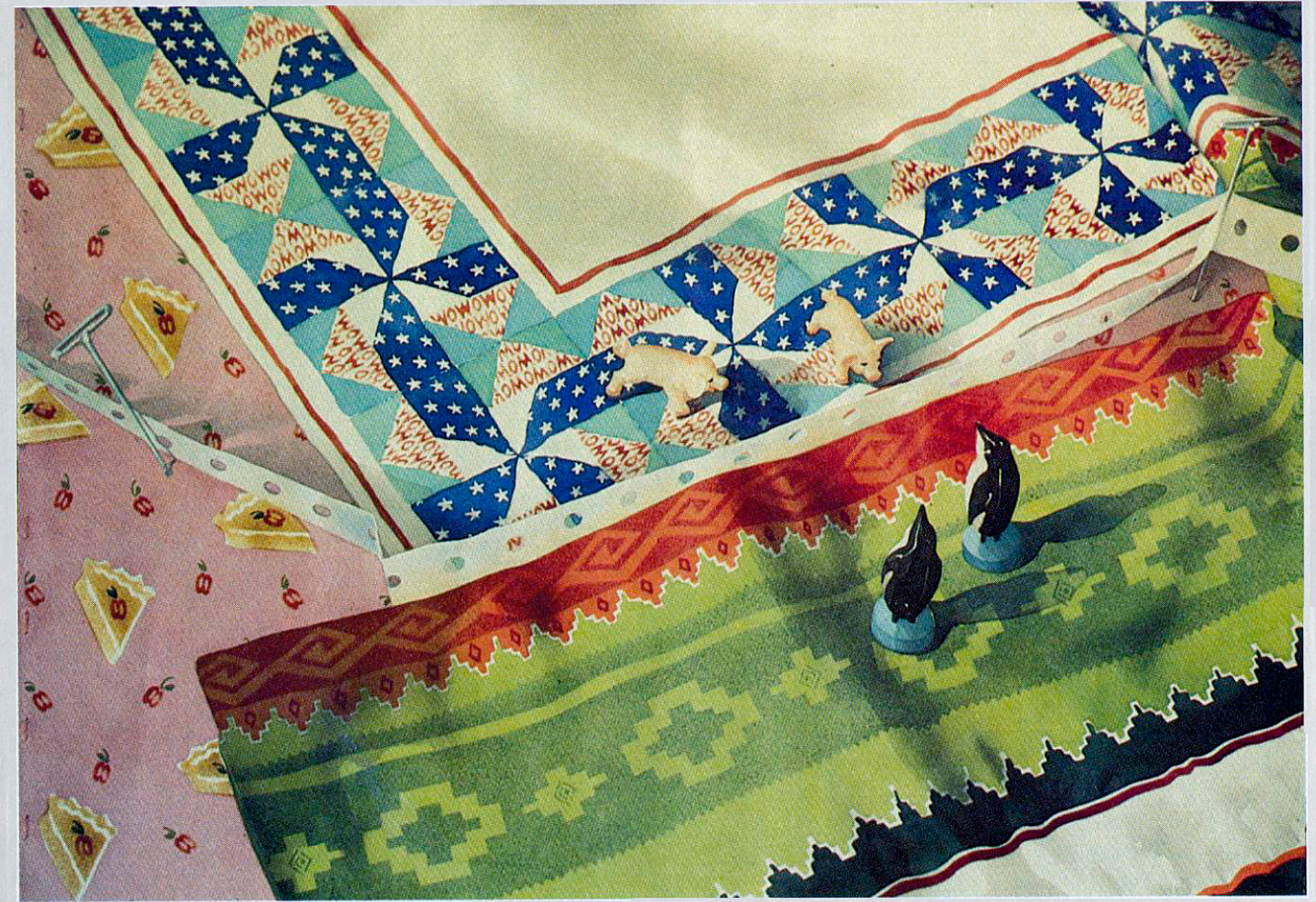


Step Three: More Colors

I completed the Mexican border, carefully painting around the penguins. I enhanced the red, green and white scheme in this fabric to represent the colors in Mexico's flag. Since I'm painting in transparent glazes of watercolor, the gray shadow areas assert themselves through these later additions of color, giving form to the fabric.

Step Four: Complete the Details

This final stage is where I add the finest details. I completed the Mexican pattern with details evocative of the Indian natives there. Then, I added the apples to the lavender fabric, to represent apple pie and to further the theme. Painting these smaller pattern elements requires not only careful painting, but also less watery paint. To finish, I added the penguins and pigs.



fabric to set up a pattern of large shapes, using edges and folds to provide movement in the work. The patterns and colors of each individual fabric piece aren't critical—I frequently change those to reinforce the concept of my work while painting. What is important is that the overall shape is exciting and fits with my creative concept.

Now, I do some pure fact-taking—I photograph the setup from several angles so that I can refer to the photos later. This is more expedient than working directly from the setup since, due to the slow glaz-

ing process that I use, I work on more than one painting at a time. Plus, I'm not after a direct replica of it—I need it only as a reference.

To begin the painting, I draw the basic contours on a piece of paper. When these look right to my imagination and my objective eye, I transfer them to a piece of 140-lb. (or heavier) watercolor paper, which has been soaked, stretched, and allowed to dry.

Although my imaginative process is as loose and free as possible, I use a "controlled" approach when applying the paint. This doesn't mean

there's no room for spontaneity, but it does mean that each wash needs to dry thoroughly before the next is added. Colors are built up in layers, so some planning is required. I need to plan which areas will remain white or the lightest values, so I don't paint over them at all. I usually work light to dark, but if I'm going to have a very dark area in the final piece, I'll paint a small area of this dark early in the piece to help me gauge the relative values of the other passages. Depending on the effect I want, I paint on dry paper and soften edges with clear water, or re-

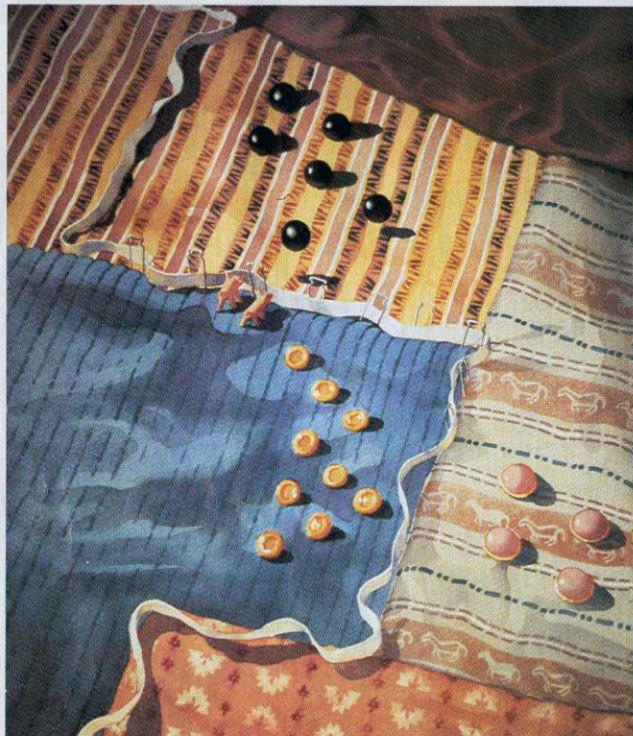
wet areas with a colored or clear-water wash, and add color or lift out highlights.

As the painting progresses, I use my imagination to create appropriate fabric patterns. I use patterns to reinforce the theme of the piece, and also to add a decorative element. I draw from many different media and methods to create the patterns, sometimes painting, stamping or stencilling them on. Stamps include ready-made ones and also hand-cut ones from soft erasers. Some of my stencils are hand-cut with a graphic arts knife from heavy stencil paper



Playing with Mud

"Mud" is usually considered bad in watercolor paintings, but in *Tug of War with a Muddy Place* (25x40) I wanted to see if mud could be a good quality. So I put to work the imaginative practice of combining opposites, and deliberately made mud my focal point. Adding the pigs made the idea "work."



Growing An Idea

Crop's Up! (25x22) is an instance where I remained flexible throughout the creative process. I had nearly finished incorporating the button "crop" when the title of the piece came to me. I decided to take it literally, and by moving the shadows of the black buttons, I made them appear to be up in the air. This small change made for a much more interesting piece.

A Clear Reflection

Here, I wanted to pay homage to the artists whose work has influenced me (and to have some fun, as well). Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* was the inspiration for my painting, *Beginning to See What He Saw* (30x22). It was particularly fun to develop a pattern for the fabric that would complement the patterns in the Picasso work.



or wax paper (depending on the complexity of the stencil and how much it will be used). I also use ready-made items such as paper doilies, nylon lace, bottoms and sides of plastic fruit baskets, string and dish rags. The stencilling process involves cutting a mask from waxed paper to protect the areas that won't receive paint. With the mask held in place with tape or weights, I place the stencil over the area and mix a "dry wash" (more pigment, less water) of the desired color, and spatter it with a toothbrush.

The painting proceeds quickly at the beginning and slows dramatically as the painting nears completion. Then, I spend a significant amount of time looking at it—upside-

down, from a distance, and in very subdued lighting, looking for errors in value, color and intensity. Here, I use much more of a critical eye than an imaginative one. Finally, when I think it's complete, I put it away for a while. When I take it out to look at it again, any elements out of place are usually obvious. When the painting satisfies me, my part in the creative process is complete for that particular piece. Imagination, coupled with objective thought has already given me an idea for the next one. When you put these imagination-boosters to work, you can make your own creative process brim with richer, more exciting ideas that come to you in even an unlikely, fleeting moment. ■

About the Artist



Imagination and personality are the key ingredients in Ellen Fountain's artwork. "In watercolor," says Fountain, "far too much attention is given to technique. Medium and technique are only an artist's tools—like vocabulary for a writer. The only new and unique thing any of us can bring to our art is our selves." Through teaching, she's encouraging this type of creativity in artists of all ages. She has taught art in elementary schools, to elementary school teachers, and now teaches at the Tucson Art Institute in Arizona.

Fountain received her own art education at Arizona State University, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees in fine art. She has experimented with many techniques, but does her current work in water-based media (watercolor, gouache, acrylic and ink) because, she says, they provide the greatest challenge in painting. Her works have won numerous awards in national and local shows, most recently in the National Watercolor Oklahoma and Tri-State Aquamedia exhibitions. Her work has also been chosen to travel with the National Watercolor Society Membership Exhibition. She is represented by the Alpha Gallery (Denver) and Fifth Avenue Designs (Scottsdale, Arizona).

CORRECTION

Fountain earned her degrees at the University of Arizona in Tucson - not at Arizona State.