

MAKING A CASE FOR CHANGE by Ellen Fountain © 2008

I've been painting nearly exclusively in watercolor for nearly thirty-five years, and in those years of practice, not only have I learned something about watercolor, but also about myself. I struggled a lot the first three years or so just trying to get a handle on how paint behaves on paper, and figuring out how to mix color so that it didn't immediately create mud. In those early years, I used too little paint and made anemic timid paintings. I tried to get by with cheap paint and cheap paper, and only after moving on to better materials did I discover some problems went away with the bad paper and paint. My early technical problems were largely replaced over time with just the normal moments of anxiety everyone faces when actively creating. I learned to silence the critical voice that tries to get me to lay down the brush in defeat when the painting's not working. I learned what serendipity really means! I learned that it was the process of discovery and the challenge of painting in watercolor that I love – more than the paintings that are the result. But most importantly, I learned that when I found myself in a period when I was no longer interested in what I was doing in the studio, it was time to reinvent myself and my practice - try a new medium or a new approach, find new subject matter or a new way of thinking about my subject matter. *Time to change.*



Clouds Over the Superstitions, Watercolor, image 15x11, 1980, private collection

And change I did. I'd taken my first formal watercolor class as a graduate student. Up to then, I'd painted in oil and acrylic on canvas. I remember thinking that I'd never run across such an unruly medium as watercolor, but by the time I finished my degree, I was hooked. I focused mostly on still life in those early years, partly because what I was looking at wouldn't change if I had to stop and come back to the painting another day. But I've had a life-long love affair with the natural world, and landscape painting called to me from the very beginning of my artistic life. Those two genres, still life and landscape, have occupied me for the past thirty plus years, but not always in the same way.

My early landscape paintings were painted in the studio, working from photos I'd taken. [*Clouds Over the Superstitions* is an example] Looking at those early watercolors now, I see my lack of experience in knowing how to compensate for what a photo always lacks - the color in shadows and reflected light, the texture of leaves and dirt, all the details you've stored in your head through careful observation of the scene in front of you, and the editing you'd do if you were there in person. I was painting technically competent works, showing and selling at a well-known local gallery, but I became more and more dissatisfied with what I was doing. I felt that these paintings were lacking in some way, and in hindsight, I realize what they lacked was ME.



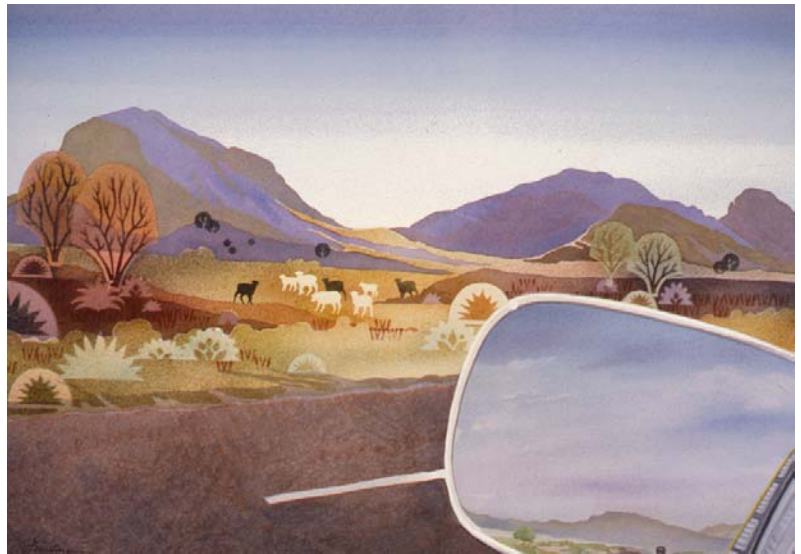
All Dressed Up and No Place to Go, watercolor, image 25 x 40 inches, 1987, private collection

I also realized that I wasn't spending enough time at my practice, and decided it was time to quit my day job (teaching art at Sahuarita Middle School) which I did in 1980, even though I had some real concerns about establishing myself as a professional artist. About this time, I saw a show of kimonos at the Tucson Museum of Art, and learned about katagami, the Japanese art of making the stencils used for printing the designs on the kimonos. The Native American pottery all around the southwest with its use of stylized, geometric designs intrigued me, as did the texture of Native American sand paintings. Mix those things up and let them incubate for awhile, and *presto-chango!* — my technically competent but uninspired landscape paintings evolved into my semi-abstract Southwest Series. The plant, animal and land forms were stylized, the space was flat, the color arbitrary, and I hand-cut stencils to add pattern and texture. What fun! (See *All Dressed Up and No Place to Go*)

I still used my photos, but they were just the jumping off point for what I wanted to say about the landscape – the pattern and order that now were so interesting and so obvious to me had gone unobserved before. I couldn't wait to see where this new approach would take me. I even said "goodbye" to my previous way of looking at the landscape in a painting that showed a representational scene in the side mirror of my car while the more abstracted, stylized patterned version loomed ahead and beside me.

These stylized southwest landscapes were the focus of my work for about five years (1980-85) and galleries liked them.

That shift in my landscape painting eventually spilled over into my still life work. I began by changing my still life approach from representational to the same semi-abstract style I was using for the landscape work. *Southwest by Far East*, shown below left, is an example of this.



Taking a Look Back, watercolor, image 15x 22 inches, 1985, Private collection



Above: *Southwest by Far East*, watercolor, image 22" x 15", 1983, private collection

Right: *Bisbee Nights*, watercolor, image 22" x 30", 1984, private collection. This is one of my early fabricscapes.

I began using hand-cut stencils and stamps to add patterns to some of the fabrics in my more representational still lifes, and then - another shift-change; the landscapes and still life paintings merged together into my Fabricscape Series. And that required another change in my process – careful observation and a thorough value drawing. I would set up the still life arrangement, arranging the fabrics to suggest landscape, and then add other elements to complete the still life. Because I was inventing my own fabric patterns with the stencils, my still life setup was usually done with plain fabrics – I only wanted them so I could observe and draw the folds and the shadows. When it came time to apply paint to paper, I depended much more on my drawing and value study than on the still life setup.

The Fabricscape Series evolved too. The first ones were flatter spatially, (*Bisbee Nights* is an example) and more related to the southwest series stylistically. Over time, they became more representational, and I also worked on a related series (Appropriations) honoring artists whose work I particularly like or who have influenced me in one way or another.





Drawing (left) and the finished painting for *Biting Off More than You Can Chew*.

I drew from my still life setup, then did the painting by referring to my drawing. I hand cut stencils and stamps to create patterns on some of the fabrics, applying the watercolor over the stencils using a soft, used toothbrush. The result is not only pattern, but a slight texture created by using the spattering technique.

War Games Series:
Biting Off More than You Can Chew,
Watercolor, 30" x 22"
image, 1991



I continue to work on my fabricscape, appropriation and southwest series, and other digital work that is done in my studio, and I don't think that will ever change, but after moving into our new home in 2001, and having the desert literally in my backyard on our 3.3 acres in the Tucson Mountain foothills, I heard the natural world calling me to get out of my studio and come out and play. And I did. Out of that change grew the plein air class at TDS, which I started offering in 2004. In many ways, I was then as new to plein air painting as many of my students. We use a period at the end of each session to share how each of us has solved a particular problem, made editing decisions, chosen a particular color palette, and in general talk about what went well and what didn't. We've done that since the class began, and I think that has helped all of us make progress.

What I brought to plein air painting from my studio practice were my observation skills, my editing skills, my practice of doing value studies, and my ability to group things into simpler shapes, something I've become very accustomed to doing for my semi-abstract southwest series. The change has been in the subject – quickly shifting light and shadow patterns, and a scene much more complex and chaotic than my still life setups. It's been a challenge for me, and requires me to shift gears every time I change from studio work to plein air.



Do I still take a camera with me when I go out to paint? Yes, but not always. And I only take photos at the end of the session. Many of these are telephoto shots that let me zoom in on some feature that interested me, and that if I do a larger painting, can give me more information about that feature than what I have in my drawing. But my drawings are my primary resource, because as I draw I'm already editing, rearranging, deleting, exaggerating, simplifying, etc. That's something the camera cannot do. Take a look at the photo of Avra Valley compared to my drawing and you will see what I mean.



Above is my on-site value study for this plein air watercolor. I make notes on these studies about light, shadow, color, and other details that I want to keep focused on as I'm painting, or to remind me of them if I don't quite finish the painting on site.

If time permits, I'll also do color samples in my sketchbook.

Avra Valley from Red Hills,
watercolor,
Image 9" x 12". 2007

In some ways, it seems like I've come full circle. The work I'm doing plein air is again more representational — as my first landscapes were thirty some years ago — but these new paintings feel far more authentic and satisfying. The years of practice, periodically changing my painting approach and style, and setting up a new set of challenges for myself shows. Change is good!