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The Power of Resistance

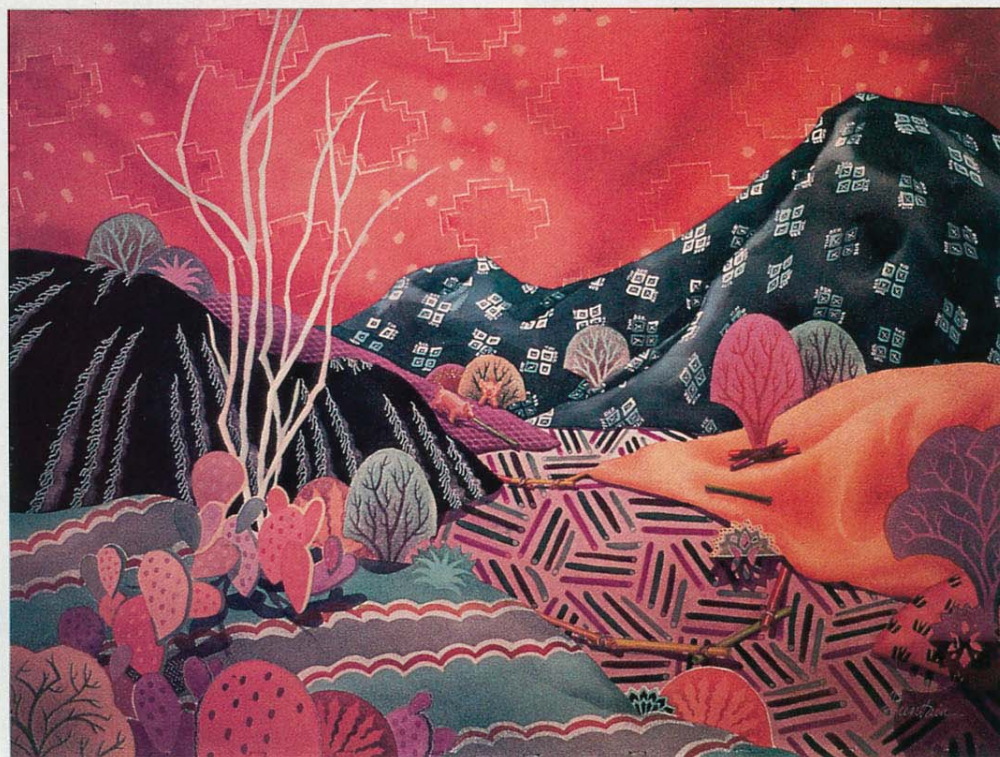
In art, what isn't there is often as important as what is. For example, the glistening quality of a watercolor is enhanced by the contrast between carefully applied washes and areas of the paper that are unpainted. One way to achieve this effect is by avoiding white areas. Another and sometimes easier method is to use a material that resists watercolor. Resist techniques often make easy work of complicated effects, such as the ripples on a moving stream, the thin lines of a snowy barbed-wire fence, or the pattern of an intricate piece of lace.

MASKING AREAS AND LINES

The most common material for watercolor resist is masking fluid. Available in small jars, masking fluids come in numerous light colors for easy visibility on paper, and some brands are white or clear. When using masking fluid, first draw the design and then apply the mask directly to the paper. As soon as it dries, apply washes of color over the masked areas. After the masking fluid is rubbed off, the areas it covered retain the white of the paper. It can also be used over dried watercolor washes to add detail on top of other colors.

Ellen Fountain of Tucson, Arizona, finds watercolor resist useful in many of her works, especially for her cloth patterns. "I've tried about every kind of masking fluid but my preference is for a white one," explains Fountain. "Because I work on a soft paper, colored masking fluids leave a stain. I'm sure, though, it depends on the paper surface, and artists who work on a hard-sized paper usually don't have this problem."

There are two types of masking fluids, nonpermanent and permanent. Nonpermanent is designed to be removed after painting (it rubs off



with a finger or a rubber cement pickup tool), whereas the permanent variety remains on the paper. "I find that permanent doesn't resist the wet paint as much," notes Fountain, "so if I want a subtle resist rather than a well-defined area, I choose permanent masking fluid. If the paint is saturated or opaque, it can almost completely cover it." The artist adds that permanent resist is also effective for artists who work slowly or on one watercolor for a long time because, although nonpermanent masking fluid resists watercolor more effectively, it has to be removed as soon as the paint is dry.

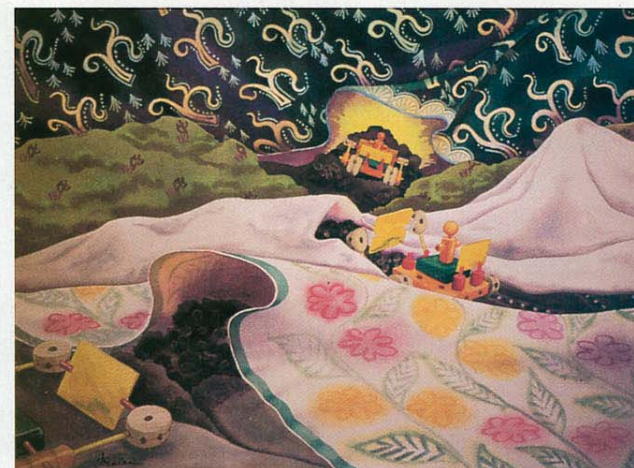
Fountain applies masking fluid with a small synthetic brush. "It's important not to use a good sable brush because the fluid will quickly ruin it," she remarks. "Before I use the masking fluid, I dip my brush into a homemade solution of about 16 ounces of water that has five or six drops of dish soap in it. I find this helps the masking fluid to flow off the brush more easily." Immediately after using the brush, clean it with soap and water. Alcohol can loosen particularly stubborn clumps.

Sandra Kahler of Seattle dislikes using brushes at all to apply drawing gum, her preferred masking fluid. She explains, "The masking fluid can dry on the brush quickly, creating a rubbery blob that gets larger and larger. I also think there is a tendency for masking fluid to look a bit obvious when applied with a brush because it can be hard to control if it gets thick." Instead, Kahler uses the quill of a feather, from which she says the fluid slides off easily, or if she wants a more textured look, she applies the fluid with a twig.

Above: *Shoving It Under the Rug*, by Ellen Fountain, 1993, watercolor, 22 x 30. Collection the artist. Fountain says, "This piece uses Tinkertoy constructions I built along with arranged fabrics to address the theme of garbage and landfills. I used removable masking fluid to create the pattern in the fabric at the top of the painting." The scene is part of the *Fabricscape* series.

Right: *Life & Death Is a Black & White Issue*, by Ellen Fountain, 1994, watercolor, 40 x 30. Collection the artist. Fountain used a crayon resist for the design on the black fabric in the lower left. She also stenciled patterns on the lower right.

Opposite page: *It's Just About the Last Straw*, by Ellen Fountain, 1997, watercolor with silver ink, 22 x 30. Private collection. This piece is also part of the artist's *Fabricscape* series. She used removable masking fluid to create the diamond pattern on the dark green hill. "I drew over waxed paper on dry, unpainted paper using a stylus to create the geometric cloudlike pattern before painting the red sky," she explains.





Vine Maple and Lily Pads, by Sandra Kahler, 2000, watercolor, 19 x 27. Collection the artist. Kahler used resist over a dry light wash.

When masking lines, Fountain uses a nib designed especially for masking-fluid application that the artist compares to a felt-tip pen. "Because it's stiff and holds its shape, it's excellent for making even marks," she explains. "Masking fluid can also be splattered onto the painting with a toothbrush or by tapping the paintbrush against my finger to create irregular dot patterns. For larger areas, I use a bigger brush, and if I'm masking a very large area I pour some fluid into an open dish." If the area is larger than an inch square, however, Fountain opts to paint around it rather than apply a mask.

Kahler uses masking fluid only when she is seeking a particular result. "Masking fluid tends to leave hard edges, so it's not suitable for everything I paint," she says. "It's perfect for my paintings of water because the hard-edged whites capture the reflections. After I mask the reflections, I can get quite playful with my colors on the water without worrying about losing any sparkle." On the other hand,

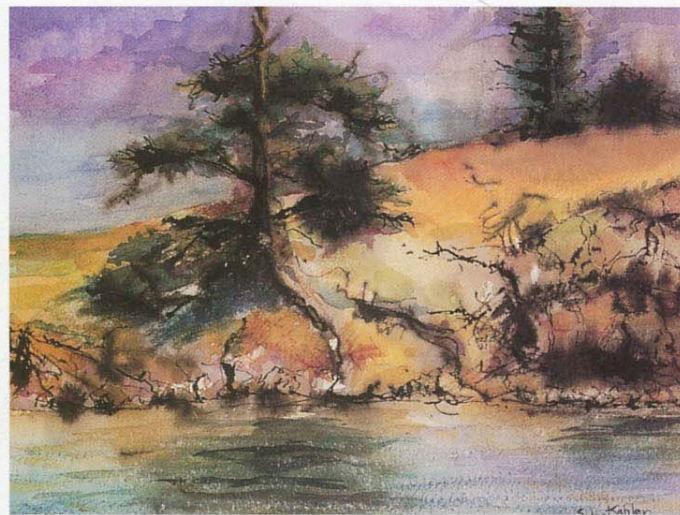
Kahler notes that she would never use the fluid for masking clouds. "The edges would be too hard and the white areas would look like bubbles of white," she explains. After she removes a mask, Kahler rarely leaves the white area untouched. "After I rub off the masking fluid, I often go back into the glaring white areas to integrate them into my painting," she says. "I do this by toning the whites down with a thin wash of color or by adding tiny spots of bright colors, similar to the sparkles of a diamond."

RESIST TECHNIQUES

Tape resist is a quick way to mask larger sections. Masking tape and drafting tape are intended for use on dry paper only, but there is a tape designed to adhere to dampened watercolor paper. Test any tape on a scrap piece of watercolor paper because papers have varied responses; some tapes come off easily, while particularly sticky brands rip the paper at the slightest touch. Make irregular masked edges by tear-

ing the tape instead of cutting it. To apply the tape, press down just hard enough to affix it to the paper. Too little pressure will allow the paint to bleed under the tape, but if the tape is applied with too much pressure, it will pull up the paper when removed.

Wax paper is a staple in both Kahler's and Fountain's studios, and they use it for masking thin white lines. Kahler explains, "I put the wax paper right over the dry watercolor paper, waxy side down, and then I draw on the wax paper with a sharpened pencil. I can do a tight drawing or a gestural drawing and get thin lines that stay relatively white after I put thin washes over them." Fountain prefers to use Wax-Tex, a very waxy paper that she buys in bulk from large department stores. Because she has found that a pencil that is too sharp can cut through the wax paper, Fountain draws her lines with a stylus that has a small round ball, similar to those for leather work. "Wax paper is also good for crumpling and then



Top: *Hat Island*, by Sandra Kahler, 1999, watercolor and sumi-e ink, 6 x 9. Collection the artist. In this painting, the artist used a clear wax crayon horizontally on the water foreground.

Above: *Fremont Boats*, by Sandra Kahler, 1998, watercolor, 16 x 20. Collection Troy and Martha Ott. Kahler applied Pébéo drawing gum on the ropes over a dry, medium-value wash.

pressing into wet washes for marvelous random grain effects," she adds. "And, a piece can be laid onto a wet wash and peeled when the wash dries to give an interesting textured look."

Wax-paper stencils and masking films sold for painting and airbrushing can also be used to mask watercolors. Fountain first got the idea for using wax-paper stencils in her watercolors

after she saw a kimono exhibit at the Tucson Museum of Art. "I saw these complicated patterns that were made with stencils, and I started thinking it would be a wonderful technique to try with watercolor," she says. "I hand-cut my stencils out of wax paper, Mylar, or stencil paper, which is a heavier waxed paper sold at art stores. I prefer wax paper because I can see through it. I trace the area I want to mask and then carefully cut out the stencil with an X-Acto knife. Next, I lay the wax paper over my painting and splatter the masking fluid or paint only into that unmasked area. This helps me obtain the illusion of texture on cloth. In other series I've made stencils of plants that I can use to create the repeating pattern on a piece of fabric."

Paraffin wax and wax crayons also resist watercolors and, depending on the smoothness of the paper, can create a wide range of results. Rubbing them on textured papers allows the wax to sit only on the tops of the bumps of the paper. Unlike the solid areas created by masking fluid, wax gives a broken quality to the resist. Kahler notes this technique is particularly good for the light reflecting off of water. "A medium-tooth cold-pressed paper works best for such highlights," she says. "The trick for creating water ripples is to keep the wax

strokes horizontal. A light use of the wax is good for close-ups of rocks."

Both artists laud the benefits of using resists, but caution against overusing a single masking technique in a painting. Most artists are not fond of viewers looking at their watercolor and suddenly exclaiming, "Oh, crayon!" ■