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Jeffrey R. Watts
instructing a student
during a workshop
held in Nicolai
Fechin's studio.

12 Step-by-Step Demonstrations

& LISTS OF MATERIALS

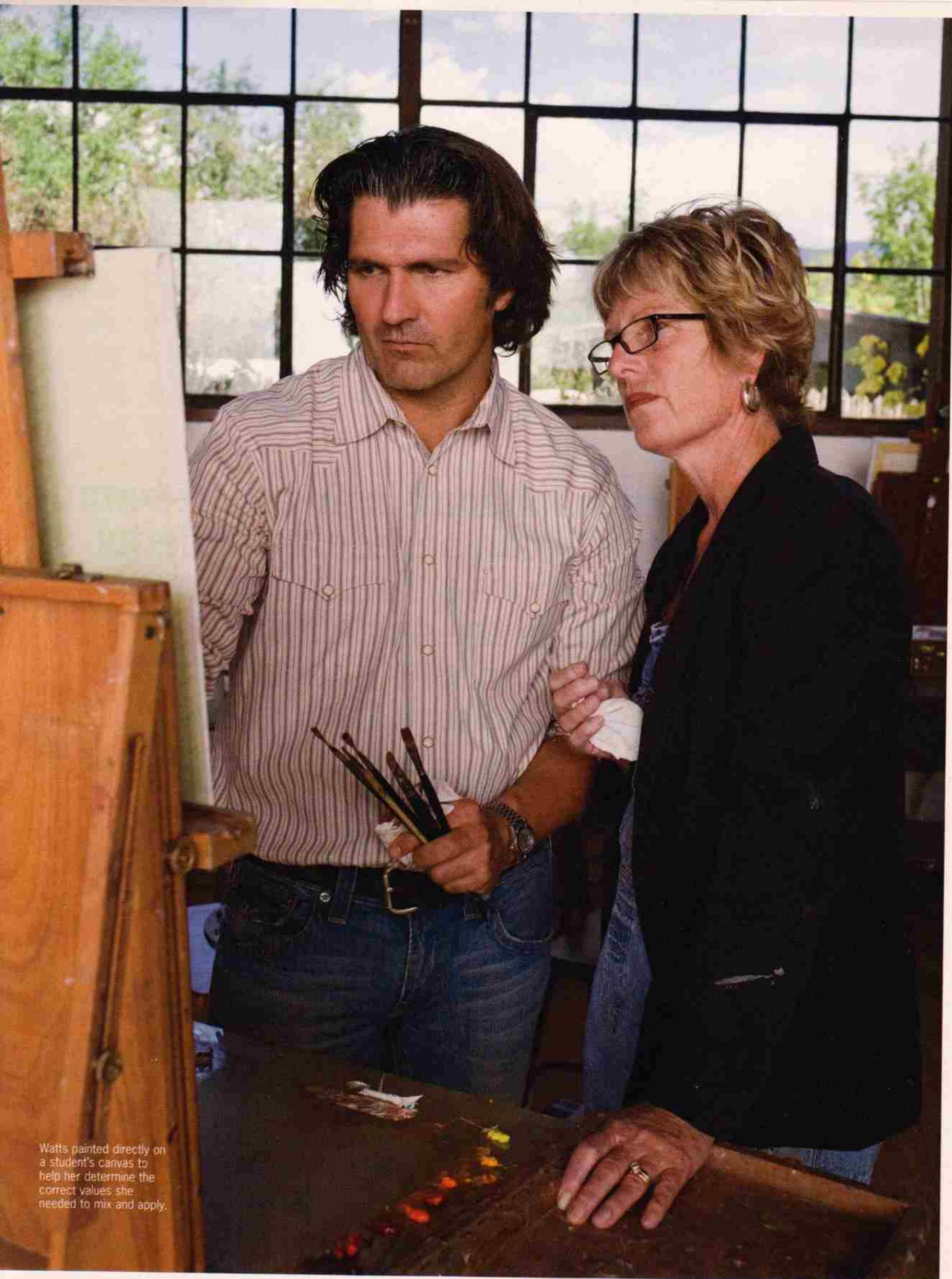
Jeffrey R. Watts:

LEARNING THE STRUCTURE & DISCIPLINE OF PAINTING “CONTROLLED CHAOS”

Californian Jeffrey R. Watts had the honor of presenting an exhibition and workshop in the Taos, New Mexico, studio of one of his heroes, Nicolai Fechin (1881–1955). During the three-day class, he showed students why solid drawing and a controlled use of relative values are important to the energetic, gestured style of painting mastered by the Russian émigré.

BY M. STEPHEN DOHERTY

Photos this article: Michael Clark, Santa Fe, New Mexico (www.michaelclarkphoto.com)



Watts painted directly on a student's canvas to help her determine the correct values she needed to mix and apply.



The contradiction inherent in any short-term workshop is that it can provide a wonderful opportunity for serious artists to improve their abilities and, at the same time, it is much too limited to allow students to make significant progress toward their goals.

Jeffrey R. Watts discussed that contradiction when he began a three-day workshop in the studio Nicolai Fechin established in the 1920s in Taos, New Mexico. "This was such an extraordinary opportunity, and we all felt privileged to be working in the exact same spot where Fechin created some of the greatest paintings of the 20th century," Watts says. "I have been an admirer of Fechin for decades, and it was an honor to be able to exhibit 28 of my paintings at the Taos Art Museum and conduct a workshop on my adaptation of his painting techniques inside the historic Fechin House studio."

The exhibition and workshop took more than a year to plan and organize after Watts and his wife, Krista, visited Taos. "We went to Taos to see an exhibition titled, 'Nicolai Fechin: A Taos Homecoming' that was on loan from the Stark Museum of Art, in Orange, Texas," Watts remembers. "During the trip, we met with Roy Coffee, the president of the Taos Art Museum & Fechin House, and Erin Simpson, who is the director. After some discussion, we set the exhibition dates of September 25 through November 2, 2008, and established a title of 'Kindred Spirits' to signify that I was pursuing the spirit of the great master in my painting. We decided to offer a workshop as part of this project from

September 26 through 28, 2008, and we limited it to 12 students because of the relatively small studio space."

Watts normally teaches five-day workshops during which he covers many aspects of drawing and painting that are related to his style, and he instructs students individually while they develop their own paintings. However, in this situation, Watts could only teach for three days, so it was necessary to pack as much information as possible into the demonstrations he offered each morning and to allow a limited amount of time for personal critiques.

The instructor was especially interested in sharing his understanding of Fechin's painting techniques with the workshop students since they were privileged to be working in the master's studio. "Fechin was greatly admired for his ability to bridge the stylistic gulf between pure abstraction and skillful representation," Watts told students. "Some of the backgrounds in his painting are totally abstract and are presented with the same aggressive, broad strokes of oil paint that one would expect to find in a work by Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, or Jackson Pollock. But Fechin was able to focus on a model's face and to control the seemingly chaotic brushwork when capturing the likeness of an



LEFT
The sign in front of the Fechin House with a reproduction of one of the master's paintings.

BELOW
The exterior of the Fechin House, in Taos, New Mexico.

BOTTOM
Jeffrey R. Watts began his first demonstration in Nicolai Fechin's studio in Taos, New Mexico.



individual. He could reel in his technique and let it go again so there would be a remarkable balance of spontaneity and exactness in the finished painting."

Watts told students that despite what they might assume about Fechin, his technique depended on solid drawing skills, a careful control of relative values, a facility with both a palette knife and a brush, and an ability to know when to exert control over one of those tools. "Fechin would start by staining a canvas with a thin application of oil paint that would remain visible in between the subsequent strokes of color," Watts explained. "He would then pick up as many as 10 different colors from the palette and apply them to the canvas all at once; and all of those marks would be cohesively organized into a specific range of values and applied in a harmonious, kaleidoscopic stroke.

"When we look closely at a Fechin painting, we recognize that the value relationship between the various colors was far more important to him than the specific pigments," Watts

added. "The mistake people often make is to assume that Fechin just slapped paint onto the canvas in a random, uncontrolled, and thoughtless manner. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Just try slapping an arbitrary selection of pigments on a canvas and you will immediately recognize the master's brilliant understanding of paint application."

Although Watts is a great admirer of Fechin's style of oil painting, his own approach is based on a number of different influences and experiences. "My working method is a hybrid of several different styles I have experimented with over the years," he explained to the workshop participants. "I like to refer to it as a 'controlled-chaos' method in which I rely heavily on my drafting proficiency while I layer paint in a somewhat experimental manner. It's as if I were superimposing a number of alla-prima paintings on top of one another, often on a textured surface. The process involves a balance of intuition and skill, with the explorations being reined in by the foundational truths of drawing and composition. Like Fechin,





ABOVE

Watts offered advice about how a student could improve the accuracy of her drawing before she began applying paint to canvas.

LEFT

Some of the instructor's paintings were on display in the studio where the workshop was held.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Watts says he is as much a painting coach as a teacher because he spends a great deal of time encouraging students and helping them enjoy the painting process.





Above

Watts stood back from his Soltek easel as he painted straight lines to establish the size of his portrait and the proportional relationship of the model's features.



Above

The model who posed for Watts and the workshop students.



Step 1

Working on a rough-surfaced canvas, Watts marked the placement of the features by gauging them against the line running down the center of the face.



Step 2

Using warm-toned mixtures of closely related values, Watts blocked in the shadow side of the model's face.

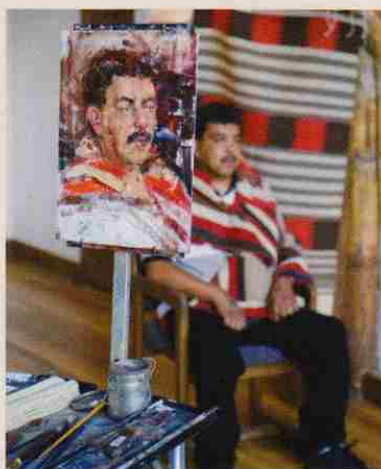
Below

The instructor's palette showing the wide range of closely related colors he used in developing the portrait.



Step 3 (Right)

Watts next painted the lighter values on the far side of the model's head.



Left

A comparison of the demonstration painting and the model who posed for Watts.

Step 4 (Left)

As he continued working to create a sense of "controlled chaos," as he calls it, the instructor softened some of the edges and developed more of the background.



THE COMPLETED
DEMONSTRATION:

Philippe

2008, oil, 14 x 11.

Collection the artist.

I often pick up several colors within a family of values on a palette knife and apply them to the canvas. But as I have advised you, that approach requires constant reflection about each move, as well as the need to anticipate future moves using all of one's accumulated knowledge and experience. It's like playing a game of chess with oneself.

"The appeal of this technique is that it offers an endless amount of room for exploration, and it captivates my attention while it challenges me to be constantly engaged by the painting process," Watts continued. "The layperson might imagine this approach as being easier than those associated with detailed representational painting, but harmonizing such chaos is extremely difficult if an artist wants to maintain correct anatomical placement, effective control of edges, intelligent calculations of values and color temperatures, and a dynamic compositional organization."

As Watts began his first painting demonstration, he talked about three different palettes of colors that artists might use when working in this style of oil painting. The first is a monochromatic palette of burnt umber and titanium white that is especially appropriate to use when an artist is concentrating on improving his or her drawing skills and ability to accurately perceive and record value relationships without the distraction of color. That is, the person just mixes varying combinations of the two colors when they want to focus on making accurate judgments about whether an area of a model's face is slightly lighter or dark than those around it. They don't have to concern themselves with whether that combination should have more red, green, or blue.

The second palette Watts suggested the students might use is generally referred to as the Zorn palette. Although Anders Zorn (1860–1920) is not known to have actually limited himself to a four-color palette, the lore among

BELOW

The view through the window of the Fechin studio.



artists is that he manipulated a limited palette to give himself as many color and value changes as was needed to create his masterful paintings. That palette includes yellow ochre, cadmium red light, ivory black, and titanium white. Watts pointed out that the advantage of working with this limited number of colors is that it forces artists to understand the complete range of possibilities in each combination. For example, a range of blues can be made by combin-

DEMONSTRATION: BEARDED GYPSY



Step 1

Watts textured the surface of canvas with a thick application of lead primer, drew the outlines of the major shapes within the portrait, and quickly applied a dark tone to the background.



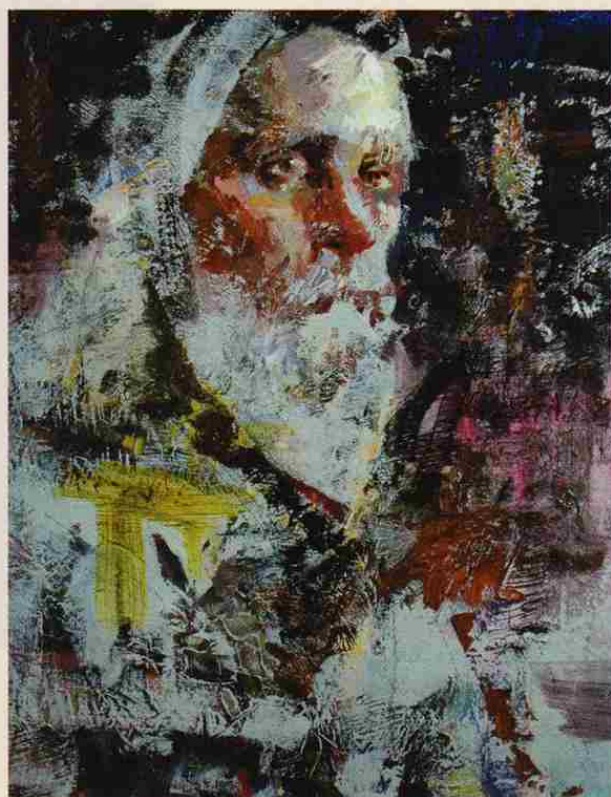
Step 2

Starting with the painting of the model's eye, Watts established an appropriate range of values and allowed the textured surface to break up the strokes of oil color.



Step 3

Expanding out from the center of interest, the artist modeled the cheek and forehead.



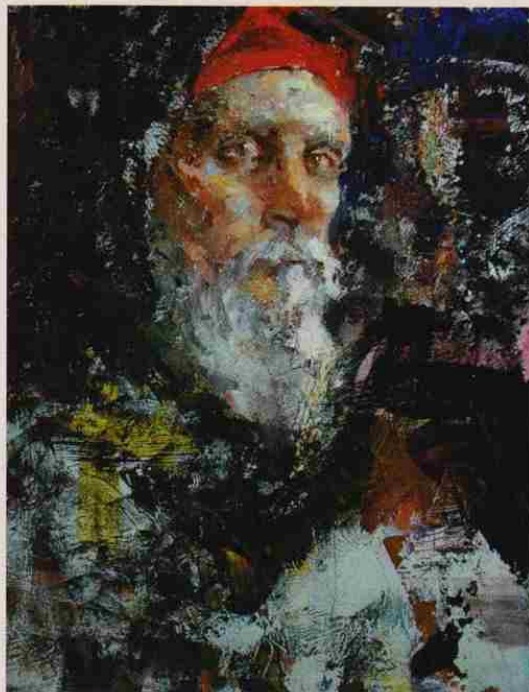
Step 4

Still working with a large bristle brush, Watts filled in the remaining areas of the background so the lighted side of the man's face became more obvious.



Step 5

A close-up view of the portrait showing the "controlled chaos" brushwork that is a hallmark of Watts' painting style.



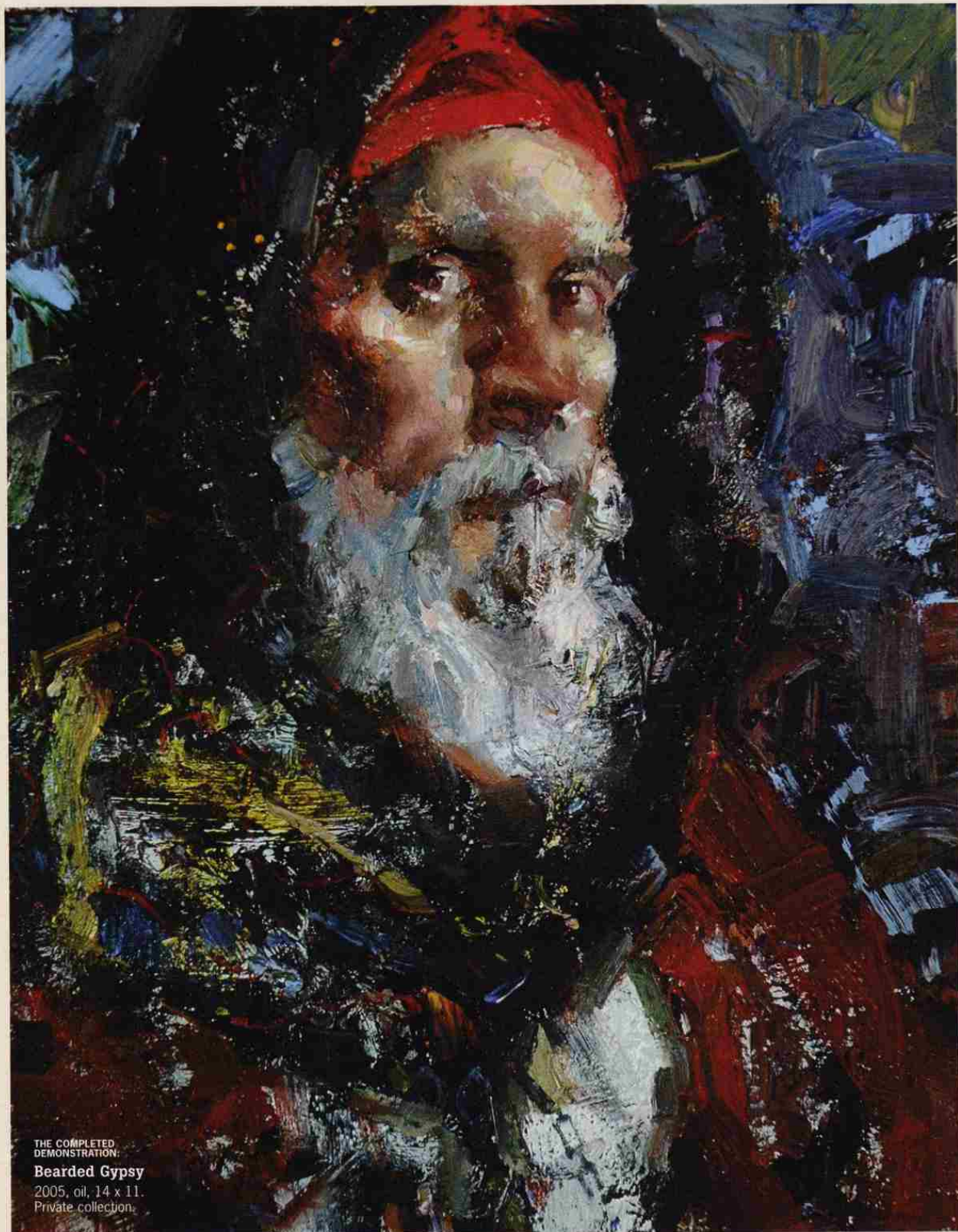
Step 6

Watts smoothed out some of the brushwork in the man's face without losing the painterly quality of the portrait.



Step 7

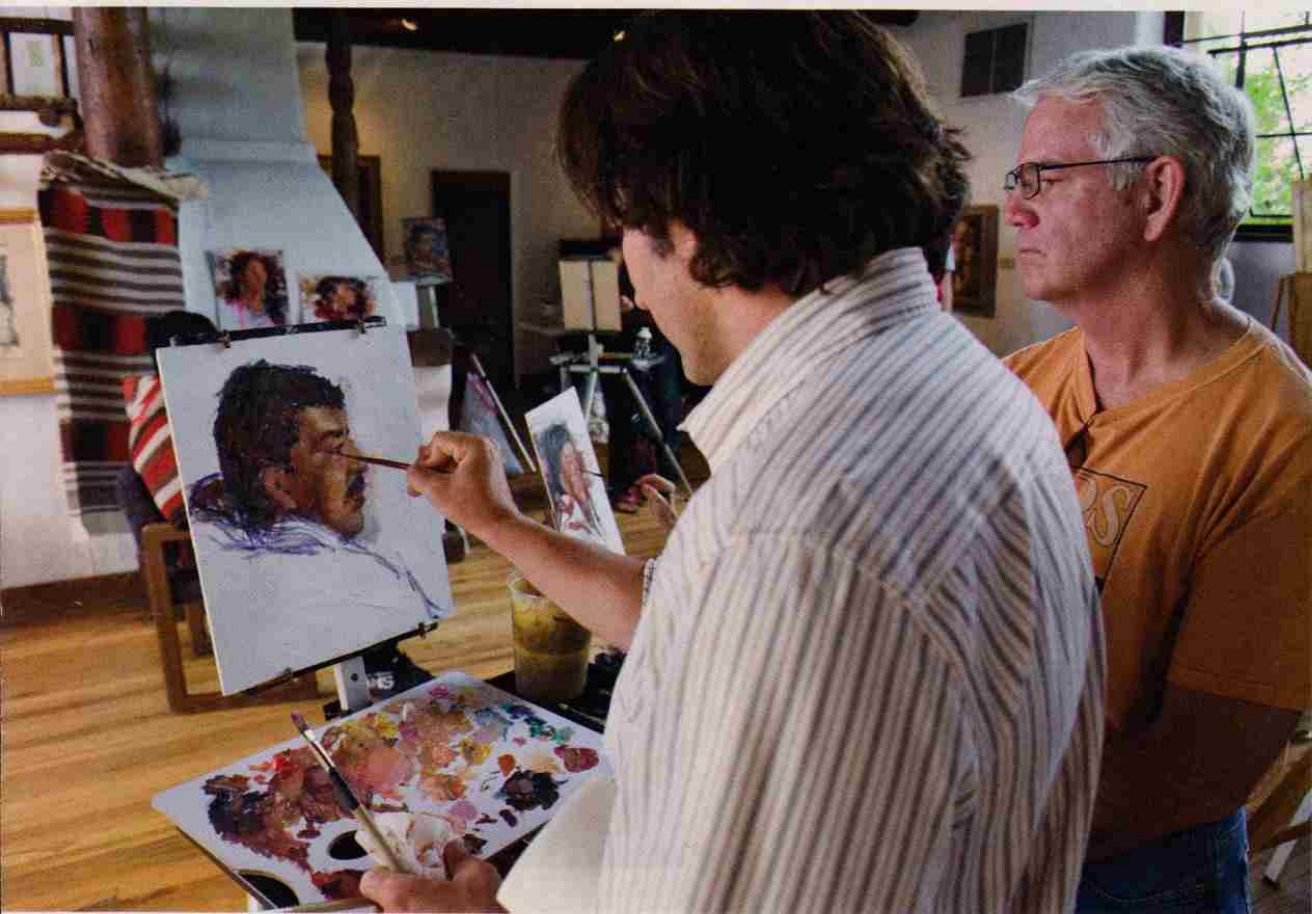
Adding more oil color to the background, the artist brought his painting close to completion.



THE COMPLETED
DEMONSTRATION:
Bearded Gypsy
2005, oil, 14 x 11.
Private collection.

BELOW

Watts helped a student by making corrections directly on the canvas.



ing titanium white and ivory black, and some rich greens will result from mixing small amounts of ivory black with yellow ochre. "The more one understands the nature of pigments, the better he or she will be at striking that balance between spontaneity and control," he told his students. "What may appear to be random and accidental will actually be the result of understanding and intention."

The third and most commonly used palette of colors is one that includes a warm and a cool version of all the primaries, along with earth colors and some "convenience" colors that are premixed combinations of the colors available elsewhere on the palette. "As standard as this selection might be, not mastering it is one of the principal reasons many artists lose control of their paintings and wind up with confusion, not 'controlled chaos,'" the instructor

said. "As I've already explained, the accurate representation of relative values is far more important to the success of a painting than the faithful recording of local colors."

To prove his point, Watts began a portrait demonstration by establishing a careful linear drawing of the model's head with a thin mixture of burnt sienna on a medium-toned canvas. Using a line drawn down the center of the face as a gauge of proportional relationships, he marked the level of the eye, nose, mouth, and chin and then moved laterally to determine the exact width of those features, frequently stepping back from his canvas to evaluate the drawing against his view of the live model.

Once Watts was satisfied that his drawing was correct, he began applying patches of unblended color on the shadow side of the man's face, allowing the underlying tone of

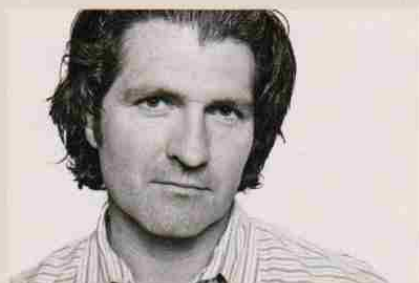
BELOW LEFT

A student painting of the same model who posed for the instructor.



BELOW RIGHT

Another student painting showing how the workshop participants tried to adapt the techniques Watts demonstrated.



About the Artist

Jeffrey R. Watts studied at the California Art Institute, in West Lake Village, California, where he later taught. He worked in the movie industry and later founded the Watts Atelier of the Arts, in Encinitas, California, where he continues to direct the educational program. His paintings have been included in major group and solo exhibitions organized by the Oil Painters of America, the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, in Oklahoma City, the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, in San Antonio, and the Taos Art Museum & Fechin House, in Taos, New Mexico. For more information, visit the artist's website at www.jeffreyrwatts.com or the Watts Atelier of the Arts website at www.wattsatelier.com.

the canvas to show between the brushstrokes. He then blocked in the middle range of values and then the lighter tones. At that point he was ready to apply several closely related background colors behind the model's head so that its shape was clear and complete.

After the artist completed his morning demonstrations, the students set up their easels to paint, and he circulated among them to offer advice and to work directly on their canvases. Says the instructor, "I try to shake students up a little bit during my initial lecture about the skills required for painting so they approach it with the level of seriousness that will lead to significant improvement, and then I encourage and guide them as they try to remember and apply everything they have seen and heard." ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.

Watts' Work



Fall
2008, oil, 24 x 18.
All artwork this
article private
collection unless
otherwise indicated.

Watts' Work (CONTINUED)



LEFT

Teasha

2008, oil, 36 x 20.

TOP RIGHT

Young Gypsy

2008, oil, 12 x 9.

ABOVE RIGHT

Wiley Irishman

2007, oil, 24 x 18.



ABOVE LEFT
Tractor Yard
2008, oil, 11 x 14.

ABOVE RIGHT
The Statesman
2007, charcoal, 21 x 15.

LEFT
Self-Portrait
2006, oil, 14 x 18.
Collection the artist.