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Poetic Charcoal Drawings
Colored Pencil Still Lifes
Landscapes in Pastel

Drawing & Painting

Statements About
What We See

COVER:
Seated Nude (detail)
by Jeffrey R. Watts

\$3.95 U.S./\$5.95 CAN.



Jeffrey R. Watts builds a rich textural surface in his oil paintings and stops working as soon as he has made a complete statement about his observations.

For his students to achieve the same honesty in their work, however, Watts insists they first develop the ability to draw and paint accurately.

by **M. Stephen Doherty**

Statements About What We See

"MY paintings are methodical and chaotic all at the same time," says Jeffrey R. Watts. "After years of strict academic training and study from the masters, I am finding new ways of expressing myself that are honest, individual, and challenging. The control I have and the freedom I strive for are manifestations of the same intent. The solid skills I developed allow me to make sense of the chaos that comes from using the tone of the canvas, stains of transparent colors, and thick palette-knife applications of oil colors—all in the same painting."

Watts is a unique force in the world of academic art. He started his own academic atelier in Southern California in 1992 when he was just 22 years old, and the institution has grown to become a beacon of traditional art education with about 250 students studying figure drawing, cast drawing, portrait painting, anatomy, tonal drawing, digital illustration, color theory,

conceptual sculpture, and plein air landscape, among other disciplines. The faculty of eight to 10 full- and part-time instructors, some of whom graduated from the atelier, help the students develop skills and discipline while remaining open to modern technology.

Watts defined and continues to maintain the mission of the small art school, one that is reflective of his attitude about using skills to express one's individuality, not to mimic the art of the 19th century. "I don't teach a formula nor do I paint with one," he explains. "I believe in the value of knowing how to draw, understanding the structure of the human body, composing strong designs in a picture, and handling color and value relationships, but I don't think one has to act as if they live in the 1800s to be able to use those skills. I encourage stu-

dents at the Watts Atelier to learn about digital photography, computer-aided design, video, and other modern technologies at the same time they draw plaster casts of ancient sculpture and paint from live models. I want them to use their visual perceptions and their imaginations." That broad education has allowed graduates of the Watts Atelier of the Arts to become portrait painters, graphic designers, illustrators, landscape painters, movie animators, and art teachers.

At the same time he has been teaching and operating the school, Watts has maintained an active professional career by constantly creating drawings and paintings. His drawings have always been controlled and precise, while his paintings have progressed from being tightly detailed to broadly gestured. "Even now my drawings are rather conservative," he explains. "Making drawings is a process of building a visual vocabulary one can use efficiently in painting. It's a way of quickly memorizing information about subjects that might be useful in creating paintings. I nail down the information in a consistent method so it's available to transfer into another medium if I choose."

The tool Watts uses in making most of his drawing is one he recommends

Gypsy

2005, oil, 14 x 11. Private collection.



Fifteen Hour Life Drawing

2005, Conté pencil,
24 x 18. Collection
the artist.

Mr. Metcalf

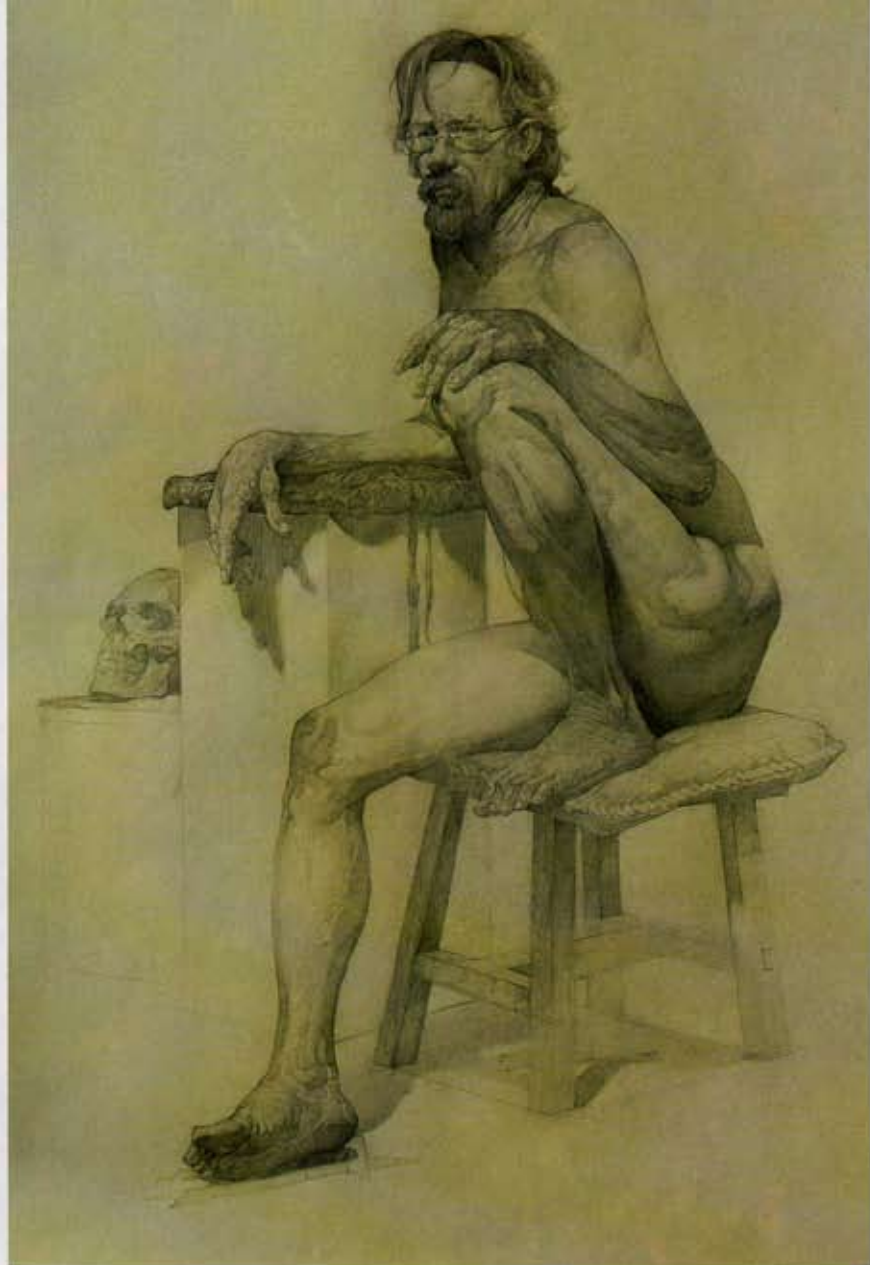
2005, oil, 20 x 16.
Courtesy Greenhouse
Gallery of Fine Art,
San Antonio, Texas.

"Making drawings is a process of building a visual vocabulary one can use efficiently in painting. It's a way of quickly memorizing information about subjects that might be useful in creating paintings."

to his students. "I sharpen a Conté 1710B pencil to a long tapered point about three inches in length," he explains. "I can turn it on its side and, by moving my entire arm, use it to make broad marks; or I can aim the point at the paper to make thin, sharp lines. Having one versatile drawing tool allows me to quickly map the values and use the same movement of my arm as I would when holding a paintbrush.

"I'm more interested in developing tones than lines in my drawings," Watts adds. "I don't spend hundreds of hours hatching and crosshatching lines, nor do I carefully stroke the paper to get a subtle buildup of graphite. I draw big shapes with the side of the Conté pencil and then refine a few hard edges with pure line. I'm concerned about accuracy and proportion, but I don't use the sight-size method of drawing to the exact same size of what I observe from a measured distance."

In recent years, Watts has been strongly influenced by early-20th-century Russian artists when creating his oil paintings. "I've always admired American Impressionists such as William Merritt Chase," he explains. "He was a great teacher as well as an accomplished painter. I've also come to admire the Russians who worked in the 20th century, especially Nicolai Fechin.



I'm amazed at the way he could block in a few broad strokes of oil that, from a distance, became a hand or a face or a background of dark colors. There is something at once subdued, ethereal, and honest about his work—even with every pattern of thin and thick textures there is a vortex of honest perception. Looking at his work reminds me that painting is about seeing correctly and putting down a statement. The challenge is to allow myself to walk away from a painting once I've said what I want to say, even if others worry that the picture is unfinished. Fechin was a master at achieving that finished consistency without overworking his canvas."

Watts achieves this cohesion in his

painting by working both from life and from photographs. "I've always painted from life, and I continue to spend 20 to 25 hours a week in the landscape or working from a model. That experience helps me understand how to use photographs as a tool, not a crutch," he explains. "I may ask a friend to pose so I can paint her face while she is in the studio, then I finish the composition from photographs. I establish a loose drawing with thin paint on a toned canvas, and then I build up oil colors both with bristle brushes and palette knives.

"The surface on which I paint is very important to the process and the finished painting," Watts continues. "It







really dictates the results, either because it's porous and it quickly absorbs the solvent in the paint or because it's smooth and allows the paint to move quickly over the surface. I especially like the latter, and I've been using a method of lead priming I read about in one of Richard Schmid's books from the 1970s. I build up the surface of the canvas with the lead primer applied with a palette knife, allowing the white material to remain roughly textured. Once the lead primer is dry, I paint over it with the combination of thin and thick layers of oil color.

"The first layers of paint are usually thin, bright, pure notes of color such as quinacridones or phthalocyanines," Watts adds. "I then build duller, grayer, and thicker colors over those notes. I prefer to work *alla prima*, but my schedule often requires that I allow

OPPOSITE PAGE
Nude With Book
2005, oil, 16 x 20.
Courtesy Greenhouse
Gallery of Fine Art,
San Antonio, Texas.

ABOVE
**Life Drawing
Portrait**
2005, Conté pencil,
24 x 18. Collection
the artist.



passages to dry and then go back over them on subsequent days of painting. If I know my time is limited, I try to anchor the painting by completing the face of the figure or the focal point of a landscape so there is a context for completing the rest of the picture.

"The palette of colors I use in the studio is quite extensive," Watts continues. "I originally worked with Emile Gruppe's palette of a warm and cool version of the primaries, then I added the quinacridones and phthalocyanines. When I paint outdoors, however, I use a more limited palette of opaque colors because there isn't as

