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A Creative Spirit Set Free

Marcia Burt explains how the medium of acrylics can remove limitations and expand an artist's options for creative expression.



Red Cliff, Morning Light (Johnson's Cove), acrylic



Portal, acrylic

Marcia Burtt refuses to be hemmed in. She wants her freedom—to paint outside when the weather is right, to paint the way she wants to paint, and to change her mind as often as she pleases. And since discovering a medium that lets her do all this and more, she's been breaking through limitations that once thwarted her.

Marcia initially learned to paint in oils, but she was always trying to achieve things the medium wasn't designed to do. "I tried to thin my paints down," she recalls, "so I could make changes, but my work became fuzzy and muddy." But then she discovered acrylics, which are quick drying and opaque enough to allow for many changes of heart. "I call it the no-fault medium," she says with a laugh. "You don't pay a penalty if you make a mistake and need to paint over something!" It's the perfect medium for an impatient artist who likes to let her paintings evolve on the canvas and who wants to retain a sparkling clarity.

Connecting with Natural Compositions

Acrylics' "no-fault" quality is especially useful to Marcia when it comes to composing her paintings. For this artist, a painting's composition tends to emerge during the creative process. While she recognizes the value of theories such as the golden mean and practices such as preliminary thumbnail sketching, she simply isn't interested in working this way. "If I worked out the composition based on a preconceived idea, I'd feel that I was just filling in the colors in a coloring book," she says. "To me that sounds boring."

Instead, Marcia takes an intuitive approach to composition: "Organizing principles should develop out of what I'm painting. They're not something I want to impose on my subjects. As novelist E.M. Forster said, 'Only connect,' so I try to be quiet and let the relationships of color and value and shapes in the elements I'm painting become obvious to me. For example, if I'm painting a dry creek bed, I look for a rhythm or pattern that unifies all the little bushes along the creek, and then I try to see how that relates to the pattern of the mountains beyond and the clouds above. I try to find the grace and order in what's there."

Marcia typically begins by using a generously sized brush to "get the things I love most about the subject down on the canvas." She works rapidly, not worrying about being too neat or precise, or "prissy" as she describes it. "Once I get one thing that I like, I keep painting until maybe a second thing relates to the first thing," she explains. "Then I keep going. I move things around, take things out, and keep putting others in until at last I'm happy with the relationships and how each element in the painting portrays the subject as I see it."

Periodically she takes time to step back and give the painting a little critique. Sometimes she's included too much information or too much excitement, and she adds a few more layers of acrylics to soften or tone down some areas. "You have to rework until you find something that pleases both your senses and your intellect," she says.

Reveling in a Full Palette



Turn of the Tide, acrylic

"That's the beauty of painting on location. You have an interaction with the subject, and the experience of feeling the wind blow and seeing the waves move comes through in the painting in some almost magical way."





Board and Batten, acrylic

When it comes to her palette, it's no surprise that here, too, Marcia says, "I don't believe in a limited palette. The range of color out there is so exciting, and that's very important in my work."

It wasn't always this way for her. "I learned to paint with a very limited palette," she says, "just Cobalt Blue, Cadmium Yellow, and Cadmium Red." Marcia now realizes it gave her a solid training in seeing value relationships and composition, although it left her uninterested in color. She had no idea that there was another option better suited to her tastes. It wasn't until graduate school—when she was asked to buy such an extensive range of colors that she could barely afford them all—that she discovered her joy and delight in color. "All of a sudden, my eyes were opened," she says in amazement.



In Memoriam, Ray Strong, acrylic

Today, Marcia's palette regularly includes 16 to 18 colors. Among her favorites are Golden's Primary Magenta, Cadmium Orange, Hooker's Green, Green Oxide, and Permanent Green. She admits that the tinting strength of some modern colors, such as Phthalo Blue (whether in oils or acrylics, she notes) can overpower a painting, but she feels the challenge in controlling them is well worth the vibrancy they bring to her paintings. "You just have to learn to use these colors and mold them to fit your concept and your vision," she says.

Conveying the Sensory Experience

While many aspects of Marcia's work have changed as she's grown artistically—her medium, her color palette, and even her subject (she once painted figures exclusively)—some qualities have remained the same. She's reluctant to put a label on her style, but she will agree to calling it "abstracted realism." She has always loved to paint from life because "what's out there" is what fascinates her most, but she also enjoys bringing a contemporary sensibility to her representational approach.



Grey Day, South Coast, acrylic

Painting outdoors on location is a natural extension of her training in painting the model from life. "I love everything that comes in through my senses, so that's what my art is about," she says. "A painting is not working for me if it's static or doesn't convey a sensory experience. That's the beauty of painting on location. You have an interaction with the subject, and the experience of feeling the wind blow and seeing the waves move comes through in the painting in some almost magical way."

Listening to Marcia talk about her love of capturing the transient, fleeting, ever-changing nature of landscapes is enough to make every artist rush outside with a French easel: "Another reason I paint from real life—and I didn't know this when I started—is that the more I paint outdoors, the more I fall in love. Well, it's not falling in love exactly... maybe it's what people mean when they talk about a Zen experience. But the more I paint from life, the more beautiful everything seems and the more I feel a love for everything. Painting becomes an ecstatic experience that reinforces itself." With that kind of fulfillment, it's no wonder Marcia has arranged her life so that she can paint outside whenever possible.

Living the Artist's Life



Having overcome many of the roadblocks that dogged her in the



Silvery Morning, acrylic

past, Marcia is now living life and painting on her own terms. She owns her own studio/gallery in Santa Barbara, California, which represents several other talented artists as well as her own work. She only wishes she had reached this place a little sooner. "If I had known I could make a better living as an artist than working a day job," she says with a chuckle, "I would have had a lot more courage, and I would have found a way to make it happen sooner!"



Shining Sea II (Garragata), acrylic



Marcia Burttt is an original member of The Oak Group and founder of Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment (SCAPE). Through exhibitions with these groups, she has helped raise over a million dollars to preserve open spaces, including contributions to the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. Her paintings have been included in exhibitions organized by a number of regional museums. Marcia's work has frequently appeared in art publications, most recently the Winter 2005 American Artist Workshop magazine. She has been awarded First Place in the San Luis Obispo plein air festival and Artist's Choice in the Sedona plein air event. To see more of Marcia's work and learn about her September plein-air workshop in Tuscany, visit MarciaBurttt.com.



Sundown, Shark Harbor, acrylic

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