letting loose

A DEMO

A loose, expressive painting style—spare in detail, emboldened with color—perfectly captures the life and vigor of a city street.

BY DESMOND O'HAGAN

They say that less is more and that's essentially the premise behind my painting approach. With detail mostly implied, I free myself to focus more on shapes and bold strokes to create pastels that possess a loose, painterly appearance akin to brushwork. A major element in my paintings is the impact of light. I'm always attracted to those unique effects that draw a viewer into the painting. Whether it's a stream of light casting shadows in a crowded restaurant or the reflections of headlights in a busy intersection, it all triggers my enthusiasm.

My working process has developed over many years, mostly through trial and error. I've come to use a variety of pastels including Unison, Rembrandt and Sennelier. The Rembrandt pastels, which are a little harder in texture than others, include darks and mid-value colors that form a good base. I like the Unison pastels for their texture and the great selection of muted grays, greens, browns and brights. The Sennelier pastels have a creamy texture that I appreciate for opaque finishing touches.

I've worked on a variety of surfaces over the years and generally prefer a lightly textured surface such as Canson Mi-Teintes (the smooth side). I prefer less tooth, because I strive for visual texture created through varying the pressure of my pastels and overlapping, as opposed to physical textures from multiple layers of pastels. Aside from the obvious problems of too much pastel with loose bits flaking off and muddy colors, I find that having fewer layers helps me achieve a more spontaneous effect.

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A key element in my creative process is observation; I'm constantly looking for interesting scenes to paint. When traveling, I'm never without my camera. And, although I enjoy working *en plein air*, the types of scenes I most enjoy painting—at dusk or dawn, busy streets and crowded interiors—are fleeting and difficult to paint from life. On a few occasions, I've completed some quick sketches that are helpful later in the studio.

What attracted me to the scene for this demo was the unique urban atmosphere and the many contrasts—like the bright headlight reflection against the muted grays and blues of its surroundings.

1 I begin my painting by sketching the image in charcoal. I consider this less a drawing and more a map of the important shapes, so I'm not interested in the quality of line or shading, but rather the variety of shapes and how to connect them. I will adjust and rework my sketch for a more complete composition.

2 I establish the dark shapes next using the sides of my pastels and three colors—black, burnt umber and dark blue. I connect some shapes where possible. This stage begins my map for the placement of darks and lights. I primarily work from dark to light, and then experiment with overlapping colors as more colors are added.

3 I add more medium-dark colors (blues and greens in the cooler range) which brings more interest to the dark shapes. By overlapping colors, I create additional colors as I build the shapes. I have no specific area that I define first; rather, I start in one section and then move to connecting areas. I check my values and leave untouched the sections where lighter colors will go.

4 In order to create balance between the warm and cool colors of the painting, I begin to introduce warmer mid-value browns and greens. While painting, I'm constantly adjusting the warm and cool colors to better convey the atmosphere I envision. If the painting becomes overly cool in color, I'll add warmer colors and vice versa.

5 I continue to refine shapes and add warm ochre, orange, grayish purple and brownish green to the cars and foreground sidewalk. By overlapping colors and varying the pressure on the pastels, I'm able to establish distance and atmosphere.

6 I continue to work on mid-value colors, the block- in of trees and background shapes, and the further definition of the figures and sidewalk. At this stage, I may add some dark colors for definition and re-work some edges. Although I don't work the entire painting at the same time, I do try to stay conscious of the overall values. It has been my experience that most technical problems stem from incorrect values.

7 I refine the tree and create some shapes where the background shows through leaves. I also add more warm colors—orange, yellow, pink—to the sidewalk. I continue to paint in the background and also block in the steam from the street with lighter colors—light purple, light blue gray, light gray and light ochre.

8 I add the bright reflections of the headlights, the headlights themselves, lights from the building, and refine the figures. This stage is where I add finishing touches, define edges, add or subtract elements and make one last effort to fine-tune the values. As throughout all the steps, I constantly step back to assess my progress, viewing the painting as a whole to see where to make final adjustments.

Desmond O'Hagan, of Denver, Colo., is a Master Pastelist with the Pastel Society of America and a Master Circle artist with the International Association of Pastel Societies. His pastels have been widely exhibited in solo and group shows, and his work has appeared in such art publications as *The Artist's Magazine*, *International Artist* and *Southwest Art*. His work is represented by galleries in Denver, Santa Fe and Ogden, Utah. "After 23 years as a professional artist, I'm still motivated and inspired to paint regardless of the up-and-down business pressures and an unpredictable economy," O'Hagan says. "My art provides me a sense of accomplishment and an opportunity to express my creativity." For more information about O'Hagan and to see his workshop schedule, visit www.desmondohagan.com.

Rainfall, Early April (14x18)

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street **smart**

While O'Hagan's artistic versatility enables him to paint a variety of subject matter—including still life and interiors—he's best known for his lively portrayals of urban life. "My interest in architecture plays a major role in a majority of my paintings," he says. **PJ**

At Rest (11x14)
"I used minimal strokes and contrasting color values to capture this scene at a streetside cafe," says O'Hagan. "Loose abstract shapes in the background were essential to keep the focus on the woman and her dog."

North Beach, San Francisco (18x24)
"San Francisco is a fascinating city to paint, and the area of North Beach is especially interesting to me," O'Hagan says. "The old buildings, hills, electric cables and lights—combined with the early evening lighting—proved irresistible."