

Sheryl Luxenburg layers dots of transparent color and then mixes them with several types of watercolor mediums to capture the light, texture, and motion that occur at specific times of the day.

MOMENTS FROZEN IN TIME

by M. Stephen Doherty

I enjoy watching people walk up to my watercolors, take a step back, and then move up to the glass to make sure they are paintings, not photographs," says Sheryl Luxenburg. "They have perplexed facial expressions as they scrutinize the pictures to see if they are indeed made with a brush, not a camera. I wait for them to discover the tiny dots of paint that come together as an illusion, as well as the small particles on the surface of the paint that suggest the motion of people, cars, and water.

"That stark realism is very important to my mission of capturing life as it actually is during one specific moment in time," Luxenburg continues. "I spend a lot of time deciding on the time of day, the exact angle to view the scene, the total perspective scope of the picture, and the best combination of animate and inanimate objects. As is the case with Photo Realist art, the scenes may appear arbitrary and detached, but believe me, I put a lot of thought and emotion into my choices

of subjects and compositions."

Those choices and the painstaking process by which Luxenburg creates her watercolors are determined by her personality, training, and influences. "I studied both art and psychology in university, and I spent nearly 20 years as a psychotherapist," she explains. "I know myself to be a practical person who tries to accept life as it really exists; the good times and the tough times. I am passionate about becoming immersed in my complicated, time-consuming painting methods, and find the challenge of complexity to be very relaxing. My approach to art is influenced in part by my maternal grandfather, who was an enthusiastic Cubist painter. I've also been inspired by my mentor, the Photo Realist artist Tom Blackwell."

Luxenburg admits that her painting technique is so complex that people often have trouble understanding the various materials and procedures she employs. She finds it best to describe the steps in sequence, explaining the reasons behind each development.

When considering subjects for a series of paintings, for example, Luxenburg spends weeks and months observing the light, drawing possible compositional arrangements, and shooting dozens of photographs. When the optimum conditions are determined, she makes detailed drawings of the subjects on paper. Once the Canadian artist is back in her Ottawa, Ontario, studio, she soaks an oversized sheet of 140-lb cold-pressed paper, tapes it to a board, and allows it to dry completely. She then lightly rules grid lines to guide her as she redraws the subject on the watercolor paper. "Tom Blackwell taught me to draw inanimate objects—especially buildings—upside down so the accuracy of the drawing wouldn't be compromised by my recognition of the subject," she states.

Using a wide assortment of transparent watercolors, Luxenburg takes a

pointillist approach, developing the image with small overlapping dots of color. "This technique allows me to use a variety of colors within one small area," she notes. "For example, shadows usually incorporate a spectrum of deep blues, violets, greens, and browns. As long as the colors are close enough in tone, they will read as one hue while creating a more ambiguous, evocative color than would be realized with a flat wash of violet or dark green." Luxenburg paints those dots with sharply pointed round sable brushes while she looks through a swing-arm magnifying glass illuminated by an attached halogen light. She spends days applying dots of color on relatively large sheets of watercolor paper until the entire image is complete.

Next, she brushes over the paint with a thin coat of Winsor & Newton

Materials

Paints:

a wide variety of colors manufactured by Winsor & Newton, Van Gogh, and Da Vinci

Watercolor pencils:

Lyra Rembrandt
Rexel Derwent

Paper:

140-lb cold-pressed

Brushes:

round Da Vinci Maestro kolinsky red sable in sizes 0, 1/32, 2/32, 4, and 6
flat brushes for background washes
scriptliner brushes for linear work

Airbrush:

Paasche System, simple-action external-mix siphon-feed with nib sizes of 1/16", 1/32", 1/16", and 1/8"

Mediums:

Grafix Incredible Nib White Mask
Liquid Frisket

The following Winsor & Newton products:

- Lifting Preparation
- granulation medium
- blending medium
- Colourless Art Masking Fluid
- Ox Gall Liquid
- aquapasto

Lifting Preparation. "When dry, the fluid causes my graphite lines to fade a bit, and it enables me to correct any mistakes that occur when I apply the next layers of paint and medium," says the artist.

Luxenburg then uses Winsor & Newton Colourless Art Masking Fluid to mask out the perimeters of large areas that she wants to isolate. With a pen nib or a Q-tip, she then applies Grafix Incredible Nib White Mask Liquid Frisket to small shapes that need to be covered. "I can later lift the frisket off with tweezers to get a clean, crisp line that promotes the look I want my paintings to have," she comments.

To capture the rough texture of walls, stones, or concrete, Luxenburg thins her paints with two Winsor & Newton watercolor mediums: a mixture of four parts granulation medium with one part blending medium. The combination creates tiny, irregularly shaped cells that look mottled and grainy. She uses a blow-dryer to set her paints and fix them permanently in place. When she wants a transparent wash to represent a sky, to glaze a smooth-surfaced object, or to add small areas of transparent color, she mixes her watercolors with Winsor & Newton Ox Gall Liquid medium. "That gives me a wash or a point of color that has more body and is therefore easier to control than paint thinned with just water," she explains, pointing out that she applies the Ox Gall medium with a paintbrush.

Perhaps Luxenburg's most unusual technique is the application of small drops of Winsor & Newton aquapasto medium on top of her small dots of watercolor paint. Describing this final step she states, "I squeeze tiny drops from a bottle or, more often, I air-brush the aquapasto and, when dry, the area looks like convex lenses. The medium magnifies and blurs the colors, which creates the sensation of motion. I apply the medium on objects that would be moving in the scene—people, cars, boats, streams of water—or on distant objects that should appear less focused. It took me

years to determine the correct ratio of gel to use with the paint, as well as the amount of time to wait before blow-drying the medium. It's important that the finished dry surface not reveal much convex contouring. The technique is meant to create a blurred illusion, not to create texture. I think the contrast between the sharply focused and blurred shapes is one of the hallmarks of my paintings." ■

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 www.myamericanartist.com

To view an Online Exclusive gallery of Sheryl Luxenburg's work visit the American Artist website.