

*Drawing is fundamental,
but connecting with the viewer
is what it's all about.*

By Philip Smallwood

Faces

of

Feeling

Emotion is the most important element in my painting. I want to convey a feeling and tell a story, but quietly. The setting, for me, is the American South and the subject is often a person who's either very old or young. Getting a reaction from my viewer is essential to me. Whether I'm showing at a gallery or a festival, I have only a few minutes to rope the viewer in. I want my work to be admired, but more

importantly, I want the viewer to relate to the work. That's what it's all about, as far as I'm concerned, and I know I've got to do something to beckon the viewer and draw him or her closer.

I try to find the gesture that reveals character and says something about my subjects' lives. My objective is to render a figure's form in such a way that it looks completely natural. When I place that natural-looking figure in a setting that



The Figure in Place

*Painting a portrait is more than drafting a likeness. In *Shadow Play* (watermedia on paper, 28 1/4 x 20, far left), the deep space of the door, the shadows raking across the porch and the boy eclipse the light and evoke a somber mood. With all that dark, penetrating space I wanted to convey a stillness, a sense of introspection. In *Auntie Katie* (watercolor on paper, 21 x 27 1/4, left) the green of the bush is a complement to the pink housecoat, but the larger effect is to frame Auntie Katie's face and suggest something about her strength of character. She's 92 and still baby-sitting children.*

is familiar to them, I convey a mood. Older people are expressive anyway. They have a wisdom that they can share with us. Since they've seen and lived through so much, they help us put things in perspective. I'm conscious that as an artist, I'm in a fortunate position. There are many people who are coping with real issues. I do what I can by trying to be honest when I paint them and by staying in touch.

I find my material by driving around the country. When someone or something catches my eye, I stop, take photographs and do quick, thumbnail sketches in pencil—mainly to get a sense of the light and shadow. Back home in my New Jersey studio, I consult the sketches and photographs to construct the composition on which the finished painting is based.

A Sense of Place and Time

The clotheslines, the dogs, the this and that—say something about people everywhere. People who live in the country and are, for the most part, of modest means have an old-fashioned sense of time. They hang up their wash in the morning and don't expect it to dry right away. When I show my work at festivals, people will often stop by and say, "That picture takes me back" or "That one reminds me of home."

Designing a Picture

Sometimes I place my subject near or in front of a window or door. The rectangular element functions as an interior frame; it attracts the viewer's eye so that the viewer will take in not only the focal point (the subject) but also the rest of the picture. I'm always thinking about how space is being occupied. I'm concerned with positive and negative space and the interplay between them. There must be visual balance. If there's a fairly large dark area, it's answered by another dark area, usually of a different shape. If there's a large light area, I make sure that there are smaller areas of light, as well. The goal is to attract the viewer's eye to the focal point and then lure the eye around the picture, so the viewer explores every aspect of the picture. If the viewer's eye gets trapped, the picture is dead. To make sure that there's visual interest throughout the picture plane, I create patterns of light and dark.

The conventional idea of watercolor—the loose, splashy effects—doesn't interest me. Sometimes you see a painting from 20 feet away and it looks wonderful, but as you get closer, you start to see the individual components and the work flies apart. If it's visual chaos up close, the work isn't as impressive, at least to me. I want my paintings to look good far away and up close. I want them to be crisp 20 feet away and crisp up close, too. I recently took a workshop with Stephen Scott Young, whom I call the "Michael Jordan of watercolor painting." The conventional wisdom is to work from lights to darks, but Young puts his darks in first.

Revealing the Subject's Story

In Another Morning I Rise (watermedia on paper, 30 x 20) I used the white sheet on the clothesline to throw the figure in relief. The pines that rise to the top of the paper suggest this woman's longstanding connection to the southern landscape. In addition, her gesture of putting her hands on her hips says a lot about her life of hard work. This painting has a spiritual base.





Placing the Figure in Context

*I like to place my subjects outside and I try to make the space surrounding them be meaningful—interesting visually, of course, but also evocative and telling. In *Sea Smells* (watermedia on paper, 30 x 20) the subject is my godson, Santos. With his eyes closed, he is listening to sea gulls and other shore birds and smelling the ocean. This is a private moment, but the painting may say something about what it means to grow up in this culture and at this time.*

His paintings have a beautiful surface, and I'm looking for the same level of execution in my own work. While I was studying with him, Young encouraged me to paint exclusively with round brushes (I use Winsor & Newton Series 7 sable, #4, #5 and #6) and to use small amounts of casein.

Casein is an opaque water medium that allows you to create a painting in the typical sense of working and reworking it. If you paint exclusively in watercolor you tend to worry about the surface; you know that you've got to get it right at the start or you'll ruin your paper. Casein allows you more latitude to change pas-

The Prerequisite is Drawing

When I was a kid, my cousin and I drew superheroes—starting from your basic action heroes like Captain America, The Incredible Hulk, Batman, etc., to the more sophisticated, surrealistic cover art of Frank Frazetta and Barry Windsor-Smith, e.g., Conan the Barbarian. That's how I learned to draw—from looking at comics and copying illustrations. Of course, at 12, I didn't have an established taste. In the pre-med program at the University of Miami, I took fine arts classes because they took me away from the grind of studying biology and chemistry. I did a lot of drawing from the figure (in pencil, charcoal and Conté) then. I gave some thought to doing medical illustration, but my late brother's influence led me to pursue a career in fine arts. He was an artist who did a lot of figurative work and when I saw what he was doing, I knew what I wanted. I never painted in watercolor until I enrolled in a class at the Arts Center of Northern New Jersey. I've only been painting for four years, and I guess you could say my technique is primitive. I don't have any formulas. I have never used salt or alcohol—although I wouldn't mind learning how. I just use paints and brushes; lately I've been painting on handmade paper made by Twinrocker (cold-pressed, 200-lb.).

Mistakes are Breakthroughs

When I first started painting in watercolor, the pencil lines left over from the preliminary drawing didn't bother me. Now they do. I'm more concerned with the finish—the craftsmanship of creating a beautiful surface. Usually I work out the drawing on a separate piece of paper and then I transfer it onto the watercolor paper, resulting in a very light contour line. At this stage of my career, it's important for me to be as direct as possible. When I first started painting, I realized I was drawing with the paint. I admire artists who can go right to the paper, and I'm striving to move in that direction.

Painting for me is painting in watercolor and casein. I love watermedia—watercolor, first of all, because it has a life of its own. Not having

The Beauty of Understatement

Sumter, South Carolina is a historic town I often visit because my sisters live there. The model here is a girl whom I've painted before. It's unusual for me to portray a figure that's smiling. This child is beautiful but reserved; her expression is nuanced; "perky" she is not. Again, the shadows, as well as the patterns of lines and rectangles, make the mood serious in Sunshine (watermedia on paper, 30 x 20).

absolute control is a good thing. Sometimes I'm lucky and sometimes I'm not. My mistakes are my biggest breakthroughs. I have moments of total panic, but after a night's sleep, I come back to the painting, and either the problem has worked itself out or I know suddenly what to do.



"Medicine, carpentry, painting—the threads that pull these vocations together is working with my hands and trying to be the best," says Philip Smallwood. Born in New Jersey, Smallwood grew up in Massachusetts, went to college in Florida and now lives in New Milford, New Jersey. Last year, one of his paintings garnered a medal at the international exhibition of the American Watercolor Society. He was also a finalist in The Artist's Magazine's 2000 Art Competition.

