

IT'S IN THE DETAILS

The meticulous detail and unflinching realism in a **Brian Cobble** pastel is the result of months of careful, painstaking labor. Here, the artist lifts the curtain to give us a fascinating peek behind the scenes of one such work.

BY BRIAN COBBLE



I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a little wary of “how-to” articles in art magazines. I mean, you work for years trying different approaches and developing unique methods that finally lead to something promising—after oh-so-many disasters (the studio equivalents of cartoon science lab explosions complete with blackened face and smoking, spiky hair)—that it seems crazy to simply offer up to the world all that you’ve learned. So naturally, that’s exactly what editor Anne Hevener asked me to do.

After an extended period of hemming and hawing, I came to a decision: Yes, people might be

interested enough to read the article, but few would be loopy enough to invest the kind of time it takes to do one of these drawings. So this is not so much a “how-to” as it is a “how-not-to,” complete with the warning: Don’t try this at home.

Mining the Medium

For years, when working in oils, I had a box of Nupastels, origin unknown, that I used on occasion for quick studies or in figure drawing classes. Eventually, I started doing some smaller, more finished drawings to hang between the oil paintings

in gallery shows. They helped fill the space, yet I didn’t view them as “real art” somehow. When eye problems brought my oil painting days to an abrupt halt, however, I slowly began to take pastels more seriously. My ignorance of the materials was almost total (“Those Holbeins and Senneliers are mighty perty, ma’am, but can I use them with my little stash of Nupastels?”). And I knew of no one who would even admit to doing pastels; they’d always had a kind of lightweight aura about them and seemed mainly to be used for drawings of rosy-cheeked children—or rosy-cheeked roses. When asked about

my art, I’d mumble something like, “Well, pastel drawings—big, kinda macho pastel drawings.”

Then, after years of trying various methods, I stumbled across *The Pastel Book* by Bill Creevy (see more on page 72). It was a revelation—like some backyard astronomer in Tucumcari or Ashtabula gazing into a mail-order telescope one night after years of searching and discovering intelligent life out there. It wasn’t so much that the book offered new and different methods (although it does), but that it affirmed that the methods and techniques I was already using were valid, and that it really wasn’t ridiculous to take pastel seriously.

Taco Allende
(13½x35)

Drown-A-Clown: In Stages

I could break down the how-to of this particular pastel drawing, and probably every pastel drawing of mine, into two parts: First, there is the design and composition; and second, the techniques and materials used to execute it.

Because I work very slowly, I have a lot of time to mull over future projects while toiling on the current ones. My pastel drawings are usually composed from several, often many, different sources—photos, sketches, memory and whole parts just invented. A lot of forethought goes into a drawing before pencil

ever touches paper. The booth in *Drown-A-Clown*, for example, was drawn from several booths; the figures were borrowed and rearranged (one of them was changed four times); and the *Drown-A-Clown* name and signage I just made up.

My methods vary, but usually I work on Strathmore illustration board, the regular surface (wonderfully versatile stuff), which I mount onto ¼-inch birch plywood with a 1x2-inch poplar backing, creating a rigid surface with a moderate tooth. In the case of *Drown-A-Clown*, however, I used a heavy sheet of Arches watercolor paper, also mounted on plywood, because the drawing was larger than the illustration board's maximum size.

I begin with a detailed pencil drawing, which can take days or even weeks of working, reworking, or just looking and thinking. Sometimes I'll apply Golden's Acrylic Ground for Pastel over the pencil drawing; the clear ground adds extra tooth and can be painted over with even oil washes. Usually, however, I can get enough tooth from the paper itself and an occasional layer of fixative. In this case, the watercolor paper already has a fairly rough surface.

Working on a sheet of Arches watercolor paper, I create an underpainting to add an underlying tone and establish an overall design.



My pastel application begins loosely with harder pastels, and then builds to multiple layers of finer and more controlled lines of color and detail.



QUICK TIP
To sharpen my pastels, I keep on hand a sheet of sandpaper mounted to a 1x4-inch board.

The last stage is basically a time for adjustments, as I work to refine and fine-tune areas to bring an overall finish to the piece.

1 Create an Underpainting
The next step is the underpainting. I usually use watercolor or gouache, but I have also used powdered pastel and turpentine, or oil washes. An underpainting not only covers the white of the paper, providing color and value for the pastel layer to react work with or against, it also creates an overall design that remains as an armature—no matter how wild the ensuing pastel layers get. For this drawing, my watercolor underpainting was pretty straightforward; other times, I've used the underpainting to create a unifying warm or cool tone, or just to help work out the pattern of lights and darks.

Gradually, the strokes become finer, more controlled and localized, and detail starts to become more important. I begin to mix in some of the softer, richer colors using brands such as Sennelier, Unison and Schmincke. Every brand seems to have a number of colors which are simply indispensable. As a result, my drawing table often looks like a giant, disorganized pile of pastels, with smaller piles on every flat surface anywhere near the easel. It may look chaotic, but I usually know where to look for what I need. I also have a set of pastel pencils that I use occasionally for softening edges or blending.

2 Apply Pastel
This next step—the actual application of pastel—is the most time consuming. I work very loosely at first, almost scribbling, usually using harder pastels such as Faber-Castell, Girault, Holbein, Rembrandt and the semi-hard line from Jack Richeson. Using sharpened pastels (see "Quick Tip," above), I build up layers almost haphazardly with free-form crosshatching of thin lines of color, rather than in blocks or broad strokes. In theory, at least, this creates beautiful combinations and contrasts of color at a micro level while working towards a unifying effect over the whole surface. Applications of fixative at regular intervals maintain the tooth and help hold everything in place.

3 The Finishing Stage
Now the drawing is fairly well covered with pastel. I've added the booth's sign and simplified the figure in the lower right. From this point on, I'm bringing the drawing up to an overall level of detail, adjusting local colors and fine-tuning lighting effects. This is often done with just a few colors, lightly "glazing" entire areas with a delicate, semi-random barrage of strokes to unify the lights and darks. (Turn the page to see the finished painting.)

So, there you have it. It's both a torturous and Zen-like (depending on your attitude) way of working, but it's what works for me. And what I've learned is that, really, the best advice is to do whatever works best for what you're trying to say—then maybe check with Creevy to see if it's kosher.



Brian Cobble is primarily a painter of the landscape—rural, urban and suburban—but he’s also, on occasion, drawn to subjects such as a state fair midway, as seen in paintings like *Drown-A-Clown* (28x45), or an interior scene or a city shop window. “The midway paintings go back to the late 1970s,” Cobble says, “when the artist David Bates would round up a couple of friends and drag us to the Texas State Fair for an afternoon of beer, corn dogs, drawing and beer. If the sleazy glitz, sensory overload and just plain freakery of a midway don’t add up to art, what does?”

Mastering Mood: A Gallery

Though the subjects of Brian Cobble's pastels may be wide-ranging—from abandoned alleys and street corners to peopled interiors and storefronts—a strong sense of mood is common to all. ■



Flint Hills Farm (24⁷/₈x43)



Departure (24³/₄x38³/₈)



Winter Afternoon, Central Park (12x33¹/₄)



Brian Cobble (www.briancobble.com) grew up in Las Cruces, N.M., and received a B.F.A. from New Mexico State University. He continued art studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, earning an M.F.A., at the Skowhegan School

of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. He eventually returned to New Mexico, settling in Albuquerque, where he currently lives with his wife, Julie, and six dogs. His work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, earning major prizes. Roger Winter—who provided the catalog essay for Cobble's 2010 exhibition at his gallery, Valley House, in Dallas—wrote of the artist: "Certainly, Cobble's technical artistry is a magical, compelling quality in his work, but not the only such quality. He's able to compose a horizontal rectangle quite as well as any living painter of any style."