

either born in California or drawn there by the natural beauty, Watts feels a connection to the past. "It gives one a feeling of contentment to think those painters looked upon some of the same landscapes as you are painting and dealt with the same challenges," he says.

Adds Gist: "The difference between artists of the late 1800s who painted the West and a painter like Jeff is that painters of the past were trying to communicate to people the beauty of places they couldn't physically travel to. We are trying to convey a beauty that might not exist in the future." Gist and Watts both believe that teaching keeps you rooted in the fundamentals, and it's how you choose to break the rules that makes you an original artist. What rules does Watts defy? "Like other portrait painters, he exaggerates expressions," Gist suggests. "He pushes the character-type over an exact likeness, much like Rockwell or Sargent would have done."

Foremost, Watts loves to push around paint, globs of it, mixing it, roiling it, fanning it out across the smooth surface to insinuate an illusion of realistic clarity. "I love controlled chaos in a painting. I want the canvas to challenge the viewer with great areas of abstract pattern while impressing them with craftsmanship," he explains. "I use a lot of palette knife and a whole lot of thumb. My fingers are one of my greatest tools."

Watts has, in recent years, won numerous awards. Yet for a time, he withdrew from the art market and entered a phase of solitary introspection. He studied the works of many deceased artists but ended up feeling most psychologically drawn to the Russian impressionists and Chinese figurative painters.

With Fechin in particular, Watts was intrigued by his lesser-known works, which revealed an ongoing experimentation with texture. "Every time I paint Torrey Pines [a seaside spot near San Diego], I can't help but think of the amazing paintings by Fechin in that area," Watts acknowledges. With some works, Watts tips his hat to Fechin in ways that viewers may never know. In the painting GLOXINIAS, Watts turns to a study of cut garden flowers but places them next to a carved bowl that at one time actually belonged to Fechin. Watts also now owns an easel that was Fechin's. "I could live with just one of his paintings day in and day out and never get tired of looking at it," Watts says.

With an eye for exotic props and a sophisticated approach to composition, Watts' portraiture projects an ambiance that seems rooted two centuries in the past. In MS. TYLKA, visual gravity is created through a lavish whirlpool of brush strokes that converge in

linear and circular patterns. Another piece, ANNA, was awarded second place at the 2004 Salon International Exhibition at Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art in San Antonio, TX. And with the portrait KRISTA, Watts says he tried to convey the essence of his wife, whom he refers to as his soulmate.

"His works are engaging, and it's because he does so much painting from life," says Mark Smith, co-owner of Greenhouse Gallery. "He brings you eye to eye with his subjects, and you can absorb the presence of the person he was painting."

Watts sums up, "When all is said and done, I want to take the viewer to memorable places. Places I



TEAL SCARF, OIL, 16 X 12.

have seen and places I have imagined. The imagination plays a very crucial role in helping to make the ordinary exceptional." □

A regular contributor to *Southwest Art*, Todd Wilkinson also writes for *Audubon*, *Western Interiors and Design*, and *Orion*.

Watts is represented by Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, San Antonio, TX.