



Still Life with Hydrangea, oil, 18" by 24"

"Sometimes you just have to stick to your guns and paint what interests you. I will admit this is an odd conglomeration of objects, but sometimes I find that appealing to paint. For me, still life is an opportunity to explore color harmonies, patinas, and technique. If I can capture the harmony of the objects, regardless of their relationships to one another intellectually, the painting will resonate with viewers and, to me, that will mean a successful effort."

JEFFREY WATTS

I'm Just a Guy Who Likes to Paint'

By Sara Gilbert

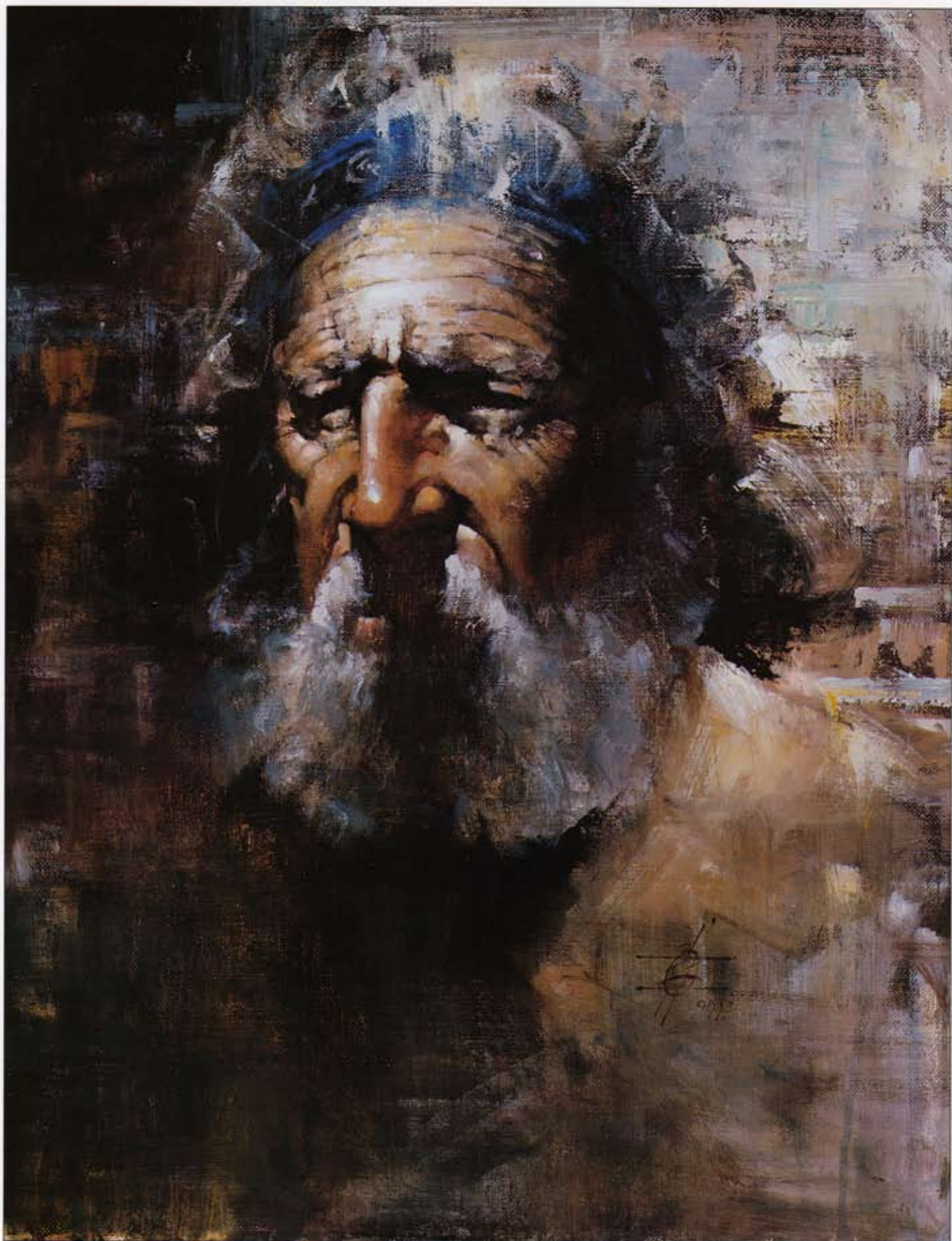
Jeffery Watts planned to become a professional cyclist. He was so committed to achieving that goal that, even as a teenager, he devoted up to eight hours a day to training. Then, abruptly, during his senior year in high school, he had to shift gears. The intense training had taken an unexpected toll on Watts' young body, resulting in an injury that took him out of contention for a road-racing career. So, instead of signing up for the Tour de France, he enrolled at the California Art Institute in Los Angeles.

"I think that injury was meant to be," says Watts, now 35. "Because of it, I looked into art schools." Art had always been on Watts' horizon. He grew up learning to draw and paint with his father, a traditionally trained illustrator. By the time he was 13, Watts and his father were painting together en plein air. "I was always skilled as a kid," he says. "I always doodled and drew and was always strong artistically. But I wanted to be a professional athlete. After the injury, I



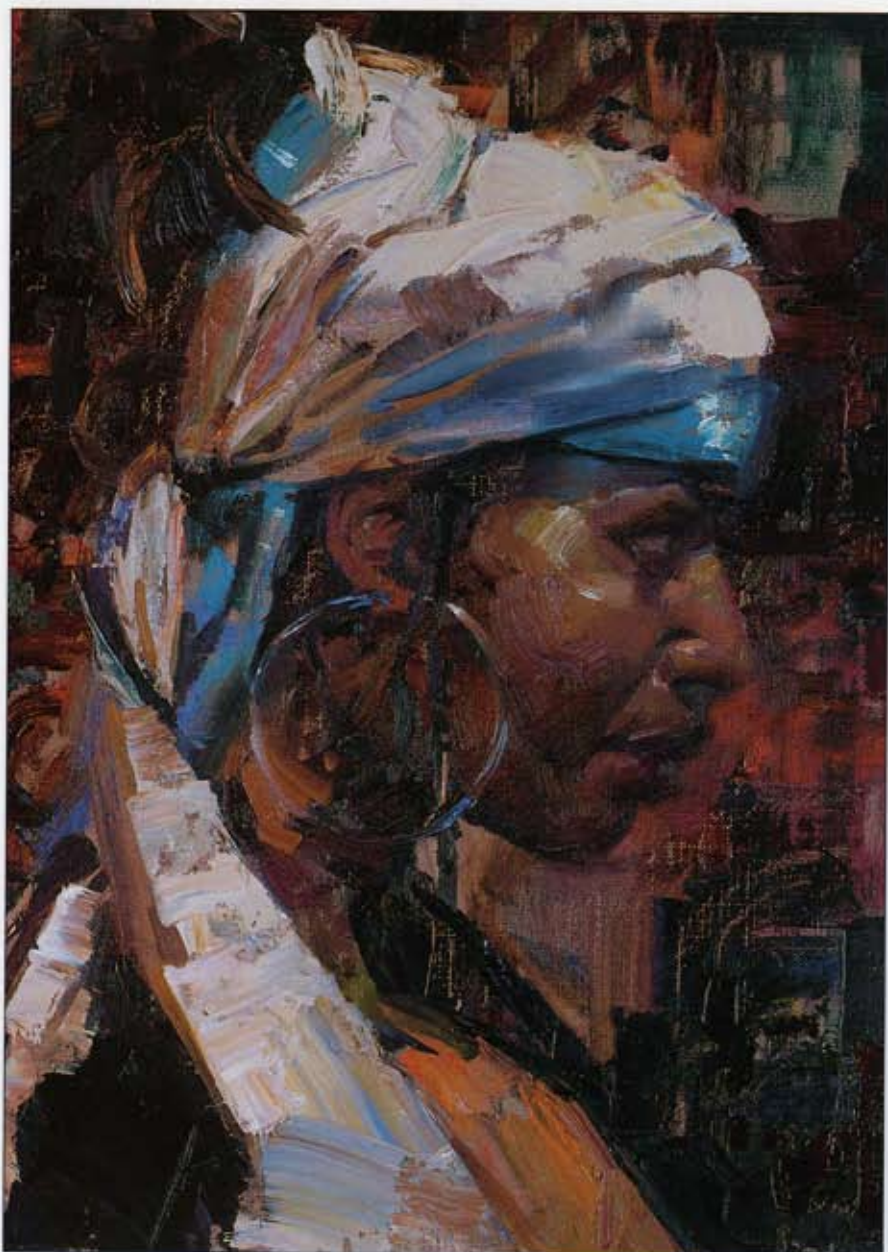
Katrin, oil, 20" by 16"

"I love the work of both Alphonse Mucha and Nicolai Fechin. This painting shows the influence of both. Mucha's sense of design was so refined and eloquent, while Fechin inspires me with his ability to abstract both shape and color while maintaining a sense of construction and drafting skill few ever attain."



Long Ago Friend, oil, 18" by 14"

"This painting holds a rich history. The subject's name is Burt Kilride, a modern-day pirate knighted by the Queen of England as 'Keeper of the Wrecks' for the British Virgin Islands. This painting was done from a small sketch I did while living in the British Islands in my early twenties."



Jasmine, oil, 14" by 11"

"This model has such wonderful skin tone. The ability to abstract the color notes gives this painting a kaleidoscope of warms and cools to play off each other. This painting was executed in one sitting. I love this type of gesture painting, as it encourages exploring intuitive color while demanding control of edge and value.

more years. By then, it had become painfully obvious that the artistic environment he had grown so fond of in Los Angeles was absent in his hometown. So he took it upon himself to change that. "I couldn't find that energy anywhere in San Diego," he says. "So I decided to set up some kind of workshop environment to sort of get that going. I had no intention of it growing into what it is now."

Today, Watts and his wife, Krista, run Watts Atelier of the Arts. While

Watts teaches five or six classes each week and participates in a couple more as a student, Krista, maintains the Web site, designs the brochures, and takes care of many of the other business details. "It's a labor of love for us," he says. Watts works with a cadre of almost 10 teachers, all age 35 or under—except for Watt's father, who helps out as well.

In the process of recreating the energy of his own art school days, Watts has become an accomplished painter in his own right. He credits



his growth as an artist to constant study and practice with other talented artists. "I started young, and I made the mistakes young painters make," he says. "It took a while to get out of that, but now my paintings are more me."

Watts continues to take two or three classes each week and craves the company of fellow artists. "I'll always be learning," he says. "I've been at this for 15 years so far, and I'll be at it for 15 more and then 15 more and so on. And I'll still be taking classes. It's so important to maintain your skills—and the only way to do that is through honest work, and the only way to do that is to paint from life."

Watts makes time to get outdoors for plein air painting sessions, sometimes as a teacher and sometimes on his own, much preferring to be in the presence of his subjects than to work from photographs. "Working from photos can make you develop a lazy eye," he explains. "You lose your ability to perceive if you work that way."

So Watts, a signature member of the Laguna Plein Air Painters, sets up his easel on the beach. He takes his paints out to the park. He looks for anything that will inspire him, he says. One day he might be moved to paint a portrait of a grey-haired man with a curling moustache, while the next day fish swimming in a pond might catch his eye. He captures waves crashing against the shoreline and storm clouds gathering over the mountains. His goal, Watts says, is



Rocky Shoreline, oil, 18" by 24"

"This painting was done one afternoon in Laguna at a location called Moss Point. The ocean is one subject that will always entice painters. In the genre of plein air, it is one of the most difficult and humbling. I have always lived near the ocean and have the utmost respect for it. Trying to capture its subtlety, while maintaining integrity, is the goal."


to avoid being typecast as painting only certain subjects. "I just paint the things that motivate me," he says. "I'm just a guy who likes to paint. It's what I do, it's what I love; it's what I get up for every day."

The only problem is finding time to focus on his own work. Watts recently scaled back the number of classes he teaches himself—from almost 14 to five or six—in order to have time to create his own art. "It feels good to be painting more," he says. "I feel like I'm moving in a good direction."

No matter where his work takes Watts, it likely won't steer him

away from the creative energy of his atelier. He feels a strong sense of responsibility to share what he's learned with others. "It's very important to me, as an artist, to give back," he says. "If I can help others do well, then I'll be better myself. It's a respect thing. And I love to teach. I really believe that everybody with a certain skill set should take the time to pass it on."

Although Watts still bikes—recreationally only, he says—and chooses yoga over more competitive sports, the discipline of his early physical training has helped to further his art career. "That self-

discipline is definitely a mindset that comes from sports," he says. "It helps me to inspire myself, and it makes me a good teacher." 

Sara Gilbert is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.