



TIMELESS APPROACH

Californian **Jeffrey Watts**
helps to lead a movement of young painters
back to the roots of classicism

By Todd Wilkinson



THE WHOLE WORLD KNOWS of the seismic fault lines rattling the ground beneath Jeffrey Watts' feet. As a native Southern Californian, Watts will tell you that living among earthquakes goes with the terrain. But as a contemporary impressionist, Watt is hardwired into another kind of temblor, this one above ground and tied purely to aesthetics.

From the ocean cliffs that jut above La Jolla and Laguna Beach inland to the Mojave outpost of Borrego Springs, the tectonic plates influencing him, in flesh and soul, are sentient. They involve the contrarian twins of ageless beauty and modern blight.

Watts' observational powers of these anomalies—revealed in a broad array of landscapes, still lifes, nudes, and portraits—have gained notice from collectors and colleagues. Within the tradition of Golden State painters, Watts “is a throwback,” says painter Erik Gist, his close friend. “If someone were to describe Jeff as a romantic, I wouldn’t disagree,” Gist continues. “He perceives places and human characters the way they used to be, not necessarily the way they are now. It’s his means of responding to a rapidly changing world. In his landscapes and figurative work, he looks to find an inner beauty that may otherwise be hidden.”

Many see in Watts' work a distant reverberation of Russian immigrant-turned-Taos artist Nicolai Fechin [1881-1955]. It’s interesting to note that in the months before Fechin died, 50 years ago this autumn, he was honored with a major retrospective at art museums in San Diego and La Jolla, where he enjoyed his largest following—as Watts does today.

“There’s an unmistakable Fechin influence in what Jeffrey does, but he has his own originality,” says Mary Linda Strotkamp of Laguna Beach, whose private art collection was featured not long ago in this magazine. Recently, Mary Linda and her husband, Jay, purchased a moody portrait by Watts titled *TEAL SCARF* that was painted, *en plein air*, at the Laguna Art Museum. The



ABOVE: SASHA WITH FLOWER, OIL, 12 X 16.

BELOW: KRISTA, OIL, 20 X 16.

OPPOSITE PAGE: YOUNG PAINTER, OIL, 20 X 30.



work is lurid and gripping—and indicative of Watts' realistic impressionism.

BORN IN 1970 IN SAN DIEGO, Watts was influenced by his Midwestern parents' sensibilities while growing up. Decades ago, his mother and father (also a painter) had been drawn to California's Mediterranean climate with its pleasing—and then far less populous—coastline. They brought with them the dreams still shared by millions of other émigrés seeking the good life. They nurtured in Jeffrey—one of three children—a reverence for art as the profoundest form of personal expression.

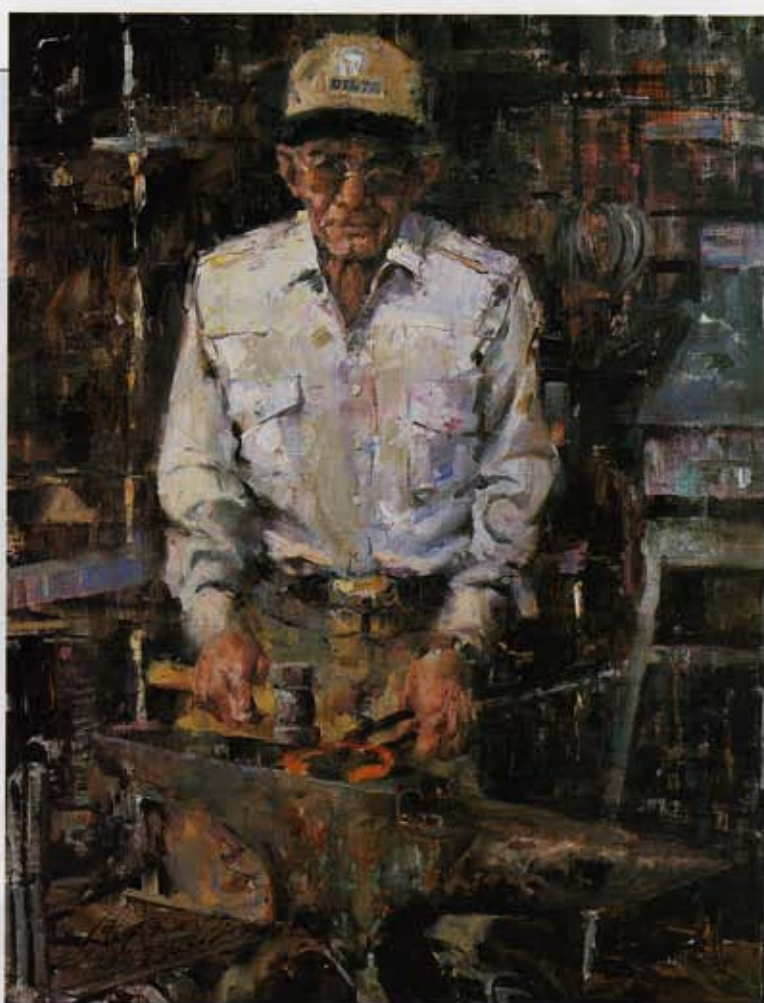
Watts' earliest memories are of hanging around a studio that his father and seven other prominent illustrators shared in downtown San Diego. He would watch them work quickly to complete assignments on deadline. "It was ideal for young, impressionable eyes, and I attribute much of my early development to this experience," he says. "It allowed me to understand, firsthand, the trials and tribulations of being a working artist."

When Watts wasn't drawing, he was pedaling as a competitive cyclist. During grueling workouts and long-distance tours, he learned how to push through physical pain and channel his mental focus. His aspirations of being the next Greg LeMond, however, ended abruptly following an injury.

Encouraged by his parents, Watts enrolled at a little-known academy north of Los Angeles called the California Art Institute in Calabasas. "It was a fantastic little school," he says, noting that he received tutelage from owner-painter Fred Fixler and such instructors as Glenn Orbik, Morgan Weistling, Andrew Burward-Hoy, and Mark Westermore.

Today, Watts resides in the seaside town of Leucadia up the coast from San Diego. In Encinitas, a neighboring community, he and his wife, Krista, operate the Watts Atelier of the Arts, a life-drawing and painting studio. Both Leucadia and Encinitas have become synonymous with artists and surfers. "Leucadia is one of the last bastions of the old funky coastal communities," Watts maintains. "It has a certain nostalgia—I would imagine the way Laguna was maybe 50 or 60 years ago."

Modeled after the French approach to apprenticeship, Watts Atelier was boldly opened when



FARRIER STUDY, OIL, 24 X 18.

Watts was just 22 and has operated for 14 years. Ten teachers oversee a curriculum that offers 80 different classes. It was launched, in part, out of Watts' own frustration that in the greater San Diego area there was no welcoming venue where young artists could find the kind of collegiality he experienced within his father's circle of illustrator friends.

"I absolutely love to teach, and I know it will always be a part of my life," Watts says of the school. "This is a very old-school approach to teaching and learning, and I am very proud of the results we are

"I love controlled chaos in a painting. I want the canvas to challenge the viewer."

attaining. Lots of demonstrations. Lots of one-on-one instruction." Watts enjoys exposing students to everything from the legendary California landscape painters to the portraits of John Singer Sargent and illustrations of Frank Frazetta.

As part of the continuum of landscape painters

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.