



IN FECHIN'S footsteps

Jeffrey R. Watts continues a master's tradition

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF

ON A LATE spring day, painter Jeffrey R. Watts is hard at work in his studio, a craftsman-style beach bungalow near San Diego. Suddenly the shrill blast of a train whistle fills the air. Watts explains that the whistles provide daily accompaniment to his hours at the easel. His studio, a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean, is fronted by railroad tracks just 20 feet from the entrance. Watts' bungalow is located in an area of Encinitas called Leucadia, which he describes as "the last bastion of funky coastline communities."

Outside Watts' studio on this particular day, the coast is shrouded in the gray,

misty fog that Southern Californians call "June gloom." Upon entering the studio, two easels come into view. One features a landscape depicting Yellowstone National Park, and the other holds a small portrait. Paintings and drawings by fellow artists, such as Mian Situ, Morgan Weistling, Calvin Liang, Carolyn Anderson, and John Asaro, dot the walls. "These are pieces that help to inspire me," Watts says. As this story was going to press, the artist was preparing for a show opening this month at Trailside Galleries in Jackson, WY.

While Watts, 41, is known for his award-winning portraits and figurative works,



Above: *The Irishman*, oil, 24 x 18.
 Top left: *Friend or Foe*, gouache, 15 x 40.
 Bottom left: *Self Portrait*, oil, 14 x 18.

in the past several years he has added a new genre to his *oeuvre*—western narrative paintings with a particular focus on the early to mid-1800s, when fur traders and mountain men inhabited the country's last frontiers. The Trailside Galleries show is the first major presentation of Watts' new western works, such as *FRIEND OR FOE*.

Whether he is painting portraits, a landscape, or historical western scenes, light plays a key role in his paintings. For Watts it's only natural; he grew up in sunny Southern California climes where light permeates daily life. He says that West Coast painters like him tend to paint

looser, more light-filled paintings than artists from the East Coast or England. "On the West Coast, we look toward artists like Asaro or [Joaquin] Sorolla, whose paintings exude light because they have been around it their whole lives," he says. "Here in California we are almost always out in the sun, we are always active, and we paint outdoors because we can."

ASARO AND Sorolla inspire him, but Watts is quick to point out that it is the Russian impressionist Nicolai Fechin [1881-1955] who has had perhaps the most

representation

Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY, and Scottsdale, AZ; Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, San Antonio, TX; www.jeffreywatts.com.

upcoming show

Western Classics, group show featuring Gary Ernest Smith and Jeffrey Watts, Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY, August 8-28.



The Craftsman, oil, 40 x 50.

1. COMPOSITION: The painting is in Nicolai Fechin's "controlled chaos" style with a lot of layering and complexity. The figure is pushed to the right. You usually don't want the center of interest to be dead center; it can make the work feel contrived.

2. LIGHT: In this painting, light is coming through the window and hitting the man's figure, giving it a dominant value—the white shirt is the lightest area. The face is the most rendered and carefully painted. The lightest lights and the darkest darks are around the face, which draws attention to the face—this is where you want to show off your

drawing skills. The large shape of the saddle, in the foreground, also attracts attention to the figure. Because of the contrast between light and dark, the saddle is what first attracts the viewer's attention. Next, your eye flows left to the other saddle. A little light on this saddle makes the eye jump over to it. A lot is happening in this area, but it shouldn't take away from the focal point: the figure. Looking at the saddle, you see an old poster on the wall and then the window. The wheel in the window breaks up what would have been a stark white space. You don't want too much detail here, which would detract from the face.

3. TEXTURE: This painting has a lot of textural layering. I dry-brush layer after layer of paint—waiting for each layer to dry, rather than painting wet into wet. There are a lot of layers and stains underneath which come through to the surface, causing the colors to vibrate and giving depth to the painting. In the upper layer, I use a combination of different tools like stiff-bristle brushes, soft sable brushes, and a palette knife. With the knife you get broken color—a shimmering effect. We call this "visual noise" or the illusion of reality. What you are really creating is the illusion of light through pattern and texture by using different layering techniques. It's impressionism

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significant impact on his fine-art career. Indeed, Watts’ style is sometimes compared to the “controlled chaos” of Fechin’s work. For example, in a Watts piece there are often areas of fine drawing in the facial features, but these more detailed areas are often surrounded by looser, more abstract shapes and patterns.

Watts relishes creating multiple layers of paint in his works. Like Fechin, he also is a master when it comes to wielding the palette knife. And he doesn’t mind using his fingers to get a sought-after result. “Fechin’s work has always captivated me with his bravura brushwork, unorthodox working methods, and layering techniques,” Watts says.

Over the years, Watts says, there have

been many serendipitous connections to Fechin in his life. For example, in 2002 he was introduced by chance to Liz Monroy, who once administered Fechin’s painting and drawing workshops in Southern California after the artist moved to the Los Angeles area in 1927 from Taos, NM. After meeting Monroy, Watts and his wife, Krista, soon became good friends with the elderly woman, visiting her every Sunday for about five years. Monroy shared stories about Fechin’s life and art with the couple. And when she died in 2007 at the age of 94, she left Watts a treasure trove of the artist’s letters, photographs, and memorabilia. Watts’ evocative portrait *LIZ* captures her likeness and spirit in later years, and in 2009 it garnered one of the top honors at the prestigious Portrait Society of America’s annual conference. The year before, the Taos Art Museum and Fechin House honored Watts with a solo exhibition in Fechin’s original home and studio.

But before Fechin, Watts was influenced by his father, San Diego painter and illustrator Robert Watts. As a youngster he often hung out in a studio his father shared with seven other illustrators in downtown San Diego. From his father he learned about not only the creative side of art but also the business aspects and demands of being a self-employed professional. When the young Watts showed early artistic talent, his parents supported his interest, including his enrollment at the California Art Institute (in Calabasas, CA, at that time) after high school graduation. At the institute, Watts studied with the late Fred Fixler, a well-known artist who trained a generation of top young representational painters including Morgan Weistling, Shawn Zents, and Jeremy Lipking.

TODAY WATTS’ career has taken him full circle, and he is teaching a new generation of young artists. In 1992, when he was only 22 and just out of art school, he founded the Watts Atelier of the Arts in



Liz, oil, 16 x 12.

Encinitas. “I didn’t intend to start a school. I just wanted a place to paint because I was missing the rigid training I had at the institute. And I couldn’t find anything like that in San Diego,” Watts says. “I was so young, I didn’t know any better.”

The school opened in a small rented space with about 12 students. These days the atelier attracts 150 to 200 students each term, and thousands of artists of all ages have enrolled in the various workshops and classes. Students come from as far away as Australia to study life drawing and painting. Some continue on as fine artists while others head to Los Angeles for positions in the film industry. “The word spread, and it just kept growing,” Watts says of the school’s rapid expansion.

While drawing and fine craftsmanship are emphasized at the atelier, Watts also conveys to his students the importance of another element he tries to incorporate into his own work—a necessary ingredient that Fechin would applaud: soul. “I believe in craftsmanship but also a soulful interpretation of reality,” Watts says. “I don’t want my work to be so accurate it bores people. I am not moved by hyper-realism. I am seeking an impressionistic interpretation of reality.” ❖

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and realism at the same time. The key is to find the balance between the control of the picture-making craftsmanship and the chaos or spontaneity of abstract color notes. To me, it’s what adds that little something extra to a painting.

4. EDGES: The eye has a tendency to gravitate toward crisp, in-focus edges. The most tightly rendered edges here are around the head, hands, and face; as the eye moves into the periphery of the painting, the edges become softer, more fragmented. The floor and the background above the figure’s head are not as crisp or in focus because the eye can only focus on one thing at a time. If everything was in focus, the painting would be uneasy for the eye. I wanted to keep the focal point in the tightest focus with the highest contrast and most interesting color notes—that directs the eye. Every brush stroke contains a unique signature.