

# M+B

## art on paper

REVIEW

### Step into Liquid

By Leslie Jones  
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*The return of watercolor as a medium of choice is nowhere more evident than in Southern California, where it has a long history.*



In 1939 a critic from Art Digest proclaimed that California had achieved a "new preeminence in watercolor." Taking over the mantle from East Coast artists and British artists before them, watercolorists in Southern California, in particular, were undoubtedly drawn to the region's abundance of light, desert landscapes, and ocean vistas, which provided the subject matter for what would, by mid-century, become a "local industry." The watercolor industry continues today, most notably in seaside resorts like Laguna Beach and through the maintenance of long-established watercolor societies, making watercolor the medium of choice among local amateurs.

Since the postwar years, however, the growing association of watercolor painting with "Sunday painters" and seaside souvenir art has led to its virtual neglect in the world of "high" art. In addition, the overwhelming influence of Abstract Expressionism and its emphasis on large bold abstract compositions in oil deterred interest from the relatively lightweight pursuits in watercolor. There is also the common assumption that watercolors are meant to be preparatory to oil painting and thus more like drawings. Often described as being between drawing and painting, watercolor is like the middle child, somewhat ignored and under-appreciated. In fact, watercolor painting--once a mainstay of a fine arts curriculum--is now not even offered in the majority of the country's most prestigious fine arts programs.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the "high art" stigma against watercolor, it has been appearing recently in contemporary art spaces and is attracting the attention of curators and gallerists who specialize in progressive contemporary art. Perhaps, this is due to the growing interest in works on paper in general. In the Museum of Modern Art's 2002 exhibition and catalogue, "Drawing Now," Laura Hoptman demonstrated how drawing, a category in which she includes watercolors, has flourished since the 1990s. Many of the artists in the show were

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looking at models from the 19th century, when "finished" drawings and watercolors were widely made, and appreciated on their own terms rather than as studies. While watercolor painting does, in fact, seem to be proliferating nationwide, the use of the medium resonates distinctly in Southern California, where it has proliferated historically and could very well be identified as the area's strongest painting tradition.

This Spring I visited the studios of several L.A.-based artists who work extensively in watercolor. The artists I met with-Carolyn Castaño, Cindy Craig, Portia Hein, Kim McCarty, Aaron Morse, and Martin Mull-all expressed an appreciation for the medium's qualities of translucence and fluidity, and a respect for its unforgiving nature. Whereas oil paint can always be touched up, watercolor cannot, forcing the artist to "go with the flow," so to speak. Allowing the medium to flow, artists like Kim McCarty and Portia Hein create images that are at once fresh and fragile. McCarty depicts adolescents and preadolescent children with washes of yellow- and green-stained flesh tones that pool and fuse into portraits, but not of individuals. Instead her figures possess the bodily and subjective transformation that characterizes those in-between years. "I've never been interested in portraiture per se," said McCarty, but rather capturing "a feeling or a mood or an essence of a person." Distinct from the solidifying tendencies of oil, for example, the mutable qualities of watercolor enhance the mood of instability, reminding us that "we live life in a very fragile world."

Hein explores fragility of another sort. In her ongoing series of lotus paintings, she depicts plants in all phases of growth and decay based on year-round observation in Echo Park Lake, near where she lives. Inspired equally by Chinese painting and J.M.W. Turner's watercolors, she seeks to visualize a quality she describes as "so beautiful and so ephemeral and so spare, but so moving." Her lotuses, which are composed essentially of controlled stains (for leaves) and wavering, watery lines (for stems), embody a certain frail elegance, relating to the fleeting nature of beauty that seems to have particular relevance in Los Angeles.

Physical beauty and glamour, in particular, is a big business in L.A. inspiring the work of Carolyn Castano. Castano addresses the obsessive aspect of artifice in her current series of "Hair Boys." Distinct from the fluid methods of McCarty and Hein, however, her paint application consists of thin, repetitive strokes with a brush no thicker than a lipliner that create elaborately detailed coiffures. "The hair becomes a drawing in itself, like calligraphy," she explained. For Castano, it is the delicateness of watercolor that she finds most appealing, both in terms of how it handles and how it connotes a certain "femininity." The "Hair Boys" are based on photographs of male friends that she prettifies with hairdos reminiscent of the 1960s and 70s, as well as of 18 and 19th century cameo portraits of aristocracy. The obsessive detailing of the hair suggests a fetishization and beautification of a male subject that confronts notions of fixed gender identity, while also exposing the excesses of artifice.

Excess is also a primary theme of Cindy Craig's work, as in her photorealistic portrayal of the candy aisle at Costco. Large, brightly-colored boxes of Tootsie Pops, M & Ms, and Jolly Ranchers (to name just a few) are piled high like building blocks, creating a candy corridor that awakens childhood fantasies, along with puerile cravings. According to Craig, this infantilism of

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the American consumer-which she describes as the desire for "more and bigger and better and cheaper and faster"-reflects a cultural psychology rooted in greed, insatiability and grandiose expectations. Craig applies layer upon layer of watercolor to re-create the rich, saturated colors of the candy aisle, engaging in a sort of seductive realism that plays off the seductive mechanisms of consumer culture.

Aaron Morse also builds up his colors in layers, although his process is derived from his background in printmaking. Starting with the "primary" colors of the printing process-cyan, magenta and yellow-Morse "blends" secondary colors by layering his primaries on top of one another. The resulting effect is flat and uniform, like the image in a print. Printed material is, in fact, the primary source for his imagery, which responds to epic frontier tales such as Fenimore Cooper's "The Last of the Mohicans." Morse juxtaposes various climatic "clips" from such tales in sequences that resemble storyboards or comic strips but with the story's action condensed, as in a movie trailer. The imagery appears to have been "stretched" vertically, however, referring formally to the distortions that occur when film is transferred to television, while also suggesting a "tall tale" and the mutability of historical interpretation. Martin Mull also explores the myths of American culture but instead of looking to popular history, he mines his own personal history, namely his childhood in 1950s middle America. Based on family photographs, as well as children's books of the "Dick and Jane" variety, Mull's imagery of "whitebread" domesticity suggests a bittersweet nostalgia for a time that was perfectly bland and not-so-perfectly innocent. Exploiting watercolor's illustrative potential, Mull's images confound any coherent narrative reading and remain elusive, like memory itself.

Clearly, the work of these artists diverges from the picturesque harbor scenes and ocean vistas that characterize Southern California watercolor painting in the popular imagination. Rather, it appears that local contemporary artists have revived the medium for a variety of purposes that speak to contemporary concerns, including the fragility of the physical world, the excesses of consumer culture, and the exploration of cultural myths. These issues are, by no means, limited to the Los Angeles area. Yet, formally speaking, art in L.A. evidences a degree of openness to the expressive potential of thin paint. This could be related to the influence of long-time resident David Hockney (who has also recently begun to work in watercolor), as well as the recent rise to international recognition of L.A.-based Laura Owens with her characteristic light touch. Distinct from oil painting, watercolor (or watercolor-like) effects convey a sense of impermanence or intangibility that corresponds, perhaps, to the ambiguous (and dare I say superficial) mood of the times. Like Owens, Hein and Morris have parallel practices in acrylic and/or oil in which they are attempting to translate watercolor effects to canvas, while McCarty, Castano and Craig are expanding the conventionally intimate scale of watercolor by employing larger and larger pieces of paper. While thin may always be "in" in Southern California, apparently size is still what really matters to get noticed on the international art scene. And while the stigma against watercolor painting may not be completely broken, these artists demonstrate that the "step into liquid" has an expressive potential like no other.