

## Karen Vernon Watercolor Basics and Beyond Workshop

GWG / October 19-21

Karen spoke to us about how art is the voice of an artist. The artist's voice is about passion. Voice is how one's painting has something to say that is different from what another artist has to say. Art is not just rendering or reproducing something that is technically correct. Art speaks to emotion.

Using contrasts of values is **one of the important elements** that takes a watercolor to the next level.

Value contrast can make a big impression within just 2 to 3 seconds of viewing a painting. The class information is an academic left-brain experience. Painting is a right-brain experience. It may possibly take 3-6 months for us to internalize and "re-file" all of the information we covered. She stressed that failure is okay because you will always learn something.

### Day 1 Composition

**Composition:** We discussed the necessity doing of **Value Sketches**. They are absolutely required. This is where you can make your mistakes and resolve them by making adjustments. As the painting moves forward, it becomes your problem solver. A value scale is the teacher when the teacher is not there. It helps you correctly identify contrast, intensity and value. Karen uses a Grayscale no matter what medium she is working in. **This helps determine the true value of a color: the color** yellow may seem to be a lighter than a red, which may seem to be a darker, but the grayscale can identify the actual value of each of those colors.

Karen does her thumbnail sketches with a sketch and wash pencil (purchased from Dick Blick-General #588) on Bristol Paper Sketch pads. These sketches do not fill the whole page **and are generally 4" x 6"**. She divides the space in sketch area into a tic tac toe grid by making small marks at the top, bottom and sides of the space without actually drawing the lines through the space. From there she can use the Golden Mean to find the area for her focal point and determine her compositional structure. The focal point will be off center, with "stepping stones" that will lead your eye to it. She will avoid exiting the painting "dead center" and have lines of light pushing to the center. Corners are all arrows that point out of the picture. Avoid those areas. The center of interest will have the greatest contrast. She uses a ratio of contrasts that is 1/3 to 2/3. Examples being: 1/3 dark -2/3 light, **1/3** warm - 2/3 cool, 1/3 texture-2/3 non-texture,. Notes on the side about the focal point, intensity changes and temperature changes are beneficial. She also notes the light source and direction.

- The artist needs to **identify the theme or concept**. Write it down and revisit it. Writing the story beside the value sketch so that the moment can be remembered (i.e.: warm light cool breeze, movement of a delicate flower in the wind,...) is helpful. When referring to a photo, you should close your eyes and go back to that moment to experience what it is that you want to express.
- The artist needs to **determine the design dominance**. Focus on the shapes and patterns and how you will incorporate the elements of line, shape, color, value, texture and intensity.
- The artist must **incorporate the principles of design** . Focus on using balance, tension, rhythm, movement, unity, harmony, contrast, gradation and dominance (1/3 to 2/3-land/sky, bright/dull, flower/background,...Don't do halves, they are boring).
- The artist needs to **determine the compositional theme or format**. Those formats are the Steelyard, Balance (see Gainsborough/**Constable**), Tunnel (takes you in), Radiating lines, Ell/Rectangle, Overlapping Shapes, S/Compound Curve (roads, streams), Z(points and diagonals with more tension), Triangle/Pyramid (upward-lifting, downward-chaos), Cross or Crucible (not centered in middle, optical illusion with complements), Diagonal (rhythm-trees & reflections/not corner to corner), Patterns.

She uses the stop varnish Krylon UV Resistant Clear Spray Varnish in a gloss finish for a harder varnish between the exterior varnish and the painting. Aquabond dries "bisque-like", but brightens back up when sprayed. This protective layer also stops the paint from moving. She sprays about 3 to 4 layers angling across the painting to let it fall on the painting. It is done outdoors and takes seconds to dry. She uses a mixture of 1 part Golden Polymer UVLS (ultra violet light screening) Varnish in gloss finish, 1 part Golden Polymer UVLS Varnish in Satin finish and 1 part water in a cool whip container. The varnish is found in plastic jars, not metal cans. This sealant may be reversed with ammonia. The paint can then be reactivated and the surface can be taken back to nearly white. She applies this final coat with 2" bristle brush found in hardware stores for about \$1.00. Do not use sponge brushes for this application.

She discussed watercolor brushes, which have a short, not long, handles. When loaded with water, the brush should balance in your hand midway. She showed us how many drops of water came out of different brands of brushes. The shape of the brush is important to consider for the job you want it to do. She loads the brushes with water before painting. Kolinsky brushes take a while to load. Natural bristles have give and the paint flows. "Snap" a brush to test it. Never leave your brushes standing in water. Water will go into the ferrule and the brush will loosen and chip. Using 6 paper towels that are folded and wrapped in a Handi Wipe make a long lasting and inexpensive surface on which to swipe your brush. Do not use a sponge, as mold can grow and be transferred to you painting from a sponge. She suggested a set up of water at 1:00, swipe pad at 2:00, palette at 3:00 painting at 4:00.

- 7020 series Loew Cornell brushes are a Red Sable/Nylon mix that have a nice point for detail and cutting around edges. They hold up well and the price is reasonable.
- Holbein Black brushes in L & XL can be used on their side or their point.
- Vernon Shaders are used for lifting paint to do reverse painting.
- Russian Male Siberian Kolinsky brushes are the most absorbent.
- Red Sable is not as absorbent.
- Winsor Newton Series 7 is expensive, but it is not essential.
- Rosemary & Company (<http://www.rosemaryandco.com/>) have excellent brushes.
- Rounds roll into a point.

Karen did a demo of a white poppy using basically 3 colors to teach light. She works flat and started by wetting the lower petal and then floating in Verditer Blue (Holbein), letting the water do the work. She also dropped in Scarlet Lake (Holbein) and some cobalt in a "drop & dabble" manner. For the upper left petal she started with water. She dropped in Verditer Blue first and then New Gamboge (Holbein). The warm colors push back the cool colors, and yellows push back everything. If she had started with the yellow first before the blue the petal would have turned green. She did some negative painting around the whites of the upper right petal. Karen prefers the pristine surface the "virgin board" for the whitest whites. She used Verditer Blue Permanent Yellow (Holbein), Manganese Blue Hue (Holbein) and Permanent Violet Reddish (Maimeri Blu). She came back to some areas without first wetting them and did some overglazing with Permanent Violet Reddish (Maimeri Blu) and Verditer Blue to take it down another level. For the center she wet the area not quite to its edges and floated in bright yellow, Yellow Ochre (Holbein), Scarlet Lake (Holbein) and some Permanent Violet Reddish (Maimeri Blu) or other magenta colored violets will not dull yellow to a gray, but rather turns it amber. The pod was wet, making sure not to touch the petal, Permanent Yellow and Manganese Blue were dropped in. Next she lifted off some reflected light. The stamens were painted later using negative painting. The background areas were wet to "points of forgiveness" and 1/8" away from petals before she dropped in Sap Green, Magenta (Holbein), Yellow, Vermillion (Holbein), Phthalo Blue, Permanent Orange and Cobalt Teal. She blobbed in pure sap green, working damp, rather than real wet.



## Day 2 Color

There are levels of wetness levels to be aware of on both paper and Aquabond. The weight of watercolor paper depends on the thickness of the paper and is determined by the weight of the paper per ream - 90lb, 140lb, 300lb.

- Cold Press 300 lb paper has these levels of wetness: flood, hashing(*fluid, floating*), mid-sheen, low-sheen, no-sheen, feel to touch, dry.
- Hot Press 300 lb paper and Aquabond have these levels: flood, mid-sheen, no-sheen, touch, dry. The no-sheen level is optimum for working on Aquabond. As it dries you can mist it with a fine mister to reactivate the paint and keep working. Make sure to spray mist away from areas you do not want to bleed back into where you are working.

Color: It is critical to get the colors correct with watercolor. There are no blacks or browns in **spectral light**. Those are the result of the absence of color. Black is the absence of all light. White is a combination of all light. We discussed Primary, Secondary and Complementary colors. Complementary colors mixed together neutralize or gray.

The natural outdoor light differs during different times of the year. Spring light is more yellow. Fall light is more orange. These differences will affect the colors that you see outside during those times of the year.

The Characteristics of color:

- Transparent paint has microscopic pigments and these settle and can be staining.
- Semi Transparent paints are more like beading balls. They segregate on wet, but don't move on dry.
- Opaque paints can create mud if too many colors are mixed together. To "fix" a muddy area you wet the area. When it is damp you use **Yellow Orange, Yellow Ochre, Permanent Yellow Light or Naples Yellow** over it. Yellow will work its way down under the mud and move it so that it can be

lifted. Another option for muddy areas is to lay down a bright next to the mud and it will brighten it due to the law of contrast.

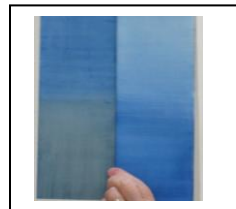
She stressed the importance of knowing the characteristics of your pigments. We should experiment and determine which are opaque, transparent, staining, etc...



With watercolor you want to see through the paint to the surface below for the light to bounce off. Glazing is wet paint over surface of dry paint that was already been applied to the surface. A wash is a layer of color containing a greater amount of water over "virgin" Aquabord or paper.

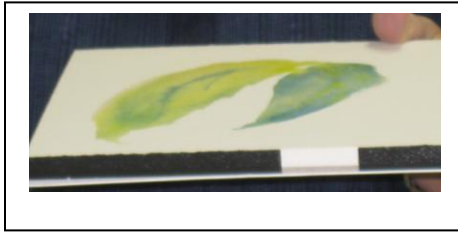
We reviewed the concepts of value, intensity and temperature.

- Value is light and dark (no change in color or intensity - i.e.: grayscale)
- Intensity is bright and dull (high key-Permanent Yellow/ low key - Yellow Ochre).
- Temperature is warm and cool (there are warm and cool reds/ warm and cool blues)



To darken a color you can add more pigment based on the grayscale. **Compliments when mixed together** will dull a color. She compared watercolor to a mistress who is playful, joyful and inviting. Play with the color on the surface, rather than pre-mixing colors on your palette.

When painting leaves you should be aware that yellow will push other colors. Putting down yellow first and blue on top will give you a green when painting a leaf or foliage of a tree. If the blue is put down first and yellow is placed on top, the yellow will be "pushy" giving a different effect. For back lit veins, put the blue first, then the yellow. The viewer will see green when viewing yellow and blue. You can offer a little green to imply a green leaf. Using the law of contrasts paint lost edges both negatively and positively in a piece to add interest. Rather than painting technical reproductions, this evokes emotion, mystery, expression, heart and soul.



Peppers, fruits, vegetables and simple forms can be painted with a yellow under-painting. Allowing some of the yellow to show through in the painting strengthens the colors.



### Day 3 Critique

We reviewed some of the key points we have talked about earlier in the workshop.

Value sketches are basic forms, lights and composition. They should be loose and done in about 5 minutes. The Compositional format is the skeleton that holds the piece together and gives it strength. Lots of circles can be offset with a triangular composition. Using Prismacolor grayscale markers (2-light value, 4 or 6 mid value, 8 dark value) will keep you from trying to do too much detail.

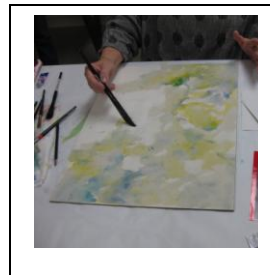
We observed two hibiscus blooms that she had painted. The top one was done all in mid-tone values. It was darkened with complements which grayed it. The bottom one was done 1/3 light values and 2/3 mid-dark values. It was darkened with color. Everything is relative. Complements mixed will gray, but side by side will vibrate and draw the eye to the contrast. There should be warm/cool, bright/dull, line/broad shape, etc... to play against each other.



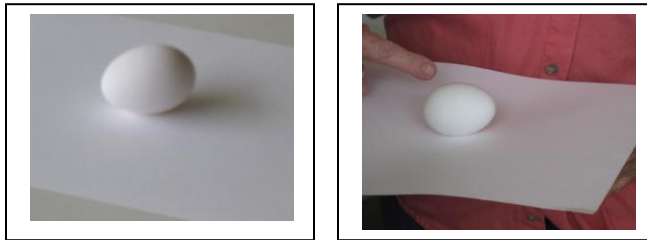
Karen did a demo of the under-painting of Morning Glories. This will dry very pale and will go away as you paint in your details. She wet portions of the surface where the composition is going, leaving a few areas dry to save some whites. She went back and added lemon yellow in the warm and gray areas. She put in manganese and cobalt blues in the cool and gray areas. She got rid of the bare corners.

The process for a successful watercolor is:

- wet to dry / later dry
- largest to smallest
- bright to dull
- light to dark



She makes a gray her students call "Vernon Gray" using 3 primaries, for example: Manganese Blue, Gamboge Nova and Scarlett Lake or a darker version would be Cobalt Blue, Yellow Ochre, and Brown Madder. Another gray she likes to make uses Rodenite Genuine (Daniel Smith) and Sleeping Beauty Turquoise (Daniel Smith). We viewed a raw white egg on white paper outdoors at noon. We were able to see yellows, reds, blues and violets on both the egg and in the shadow after staring at the egg. She cautioned us about wearing colors when working outside because those colors we are wearing can bounce up to our eyes and throw off the colors we are observing. Wearing white or gray would be best.

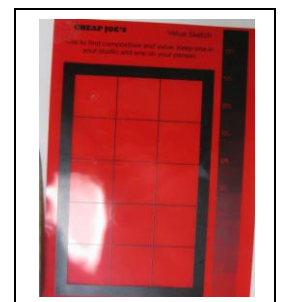


**Critique:** Critiques are great for taking you to the next level. She took us through the gallery and critiqued some of our paintings in the show. She commented on composition, values and presentation. Some of the comments she had for a show are below:

- Framing of show should be with simple wooden frame and white mat. This continuity of presentation will allow the artwork itself to be showcased in a competition. Decorative frames are for galleries or sales, not competition.
- Do not use colored mats in a competition. White on white mats or using a riser (foamcore board) to lift the mat that creates a slight shadow between the work and the mat.
- Paper with torn edges mounted on top of a mat is acceptable.
- Metal frames are considered "dated." Use simple wooden frames.
- Aquabord can be put in a floater frame and have a linen liner with a beveled edge. This allows for that continuity of presentation.
- Scale of the painting makes an impact. Smaller "smaller, sleeper" paintings are often overlooked.
- Do not just paint to the size of your paper if cropping makes your design work better.
- Sweet and pretty themes such as flowers, cute children and kittens seldom win awards.
- Show presentation is simplified by hanging the tops of all paintings level.
- Decide and define type of show you wish to have. Watercolor can be defined as a water soluble medium that can be reactivated after it has dried. Water media that cannot be reactivated includes acrylic.
- She often uses a judging scale of 1-5, with no 3's, for her initial impressions of the paintings in the show. She then reviews and compares the 4's & 5's. The 5's are then taken and assigned awards.
- Movement is the most harmful thing to a painting, this includes vibrations during transportation. As the paint ages, it can become brittle and chip.

Misc. information:

She does not use the colors Payne's Gray or Indigo because they contain lamp ash. Tape Aquabord on front and back before cutting with a circular saw. Viewing a painting through a transparent red film allows you to see the values. NWS is now accepting Aquabord.



Don't purchase student grade paints. You have to use more, they fade and aren't really any cheaper.  
Transport paintings with insulation for pipes or swimming pool noodles put on the frames.  
Wrap paintings in cheap Yoga mats found at the Dollar Store.  
The dry angle for display and storage can be found at this link: <http://www.dryangle.com/home>

