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Could International Artist magazine's Flowers and Gardens Art Prize Winner **Stephen Blackburn's** poured wash technique put some zest back into your predictable watercolors?

At what point in a painting is there too much planning and not enough spontaneity? Obviously, there needs to be a certain amount of preparation to complete a successful watercolor painting, but recently I began to feel that I had reached a plateau in my painting experience. I had too much control over the process, and usually I knew exactly how a painting would come out. Many representational painters turn toward the abstract in this case, but I didn't want to completely leave my artistic roots of painting close-up florals and other

***Sun Baked*, watercolor on hot press watercolor board, 30 x 13" (76 x 33cm)**



the flow

subjects. In searching for a way to challenge myself, I turned to pouring paint and added liquid masking fluid to make it even more interesting.

The pouring process

My process begins with drawing the basic shapes of the composition in pencil on hot press watercolor board. I draw carefully enough to help me know where to pour the masking fluid and the colors, but do not spend a lot of time on the drawing, which will be lifted when the mask is removed. I then pour the masking fluid straight out of the bottle and begin to move it around by spritzing it with water from a spray bottle. I usually make several small pours of masking fluid and



Iris, watercolor on hot press watercolor board, 30 x 20" (76 x 51cm)

“Such a loose, intuitive approach to painting can easily get out of hand, so I keep some basic principles in mind to ensure pleasing results.”

move them around until they connect and run off the edges of the painting rectangle. My goal is to preserve an abstract play of light throughout the composition.

After the masking fluid dries, it is time to let the colors flow. After wetting the surface with a spray bottle, I pour on a wet, watery solution of the brightest color — which is typically also a warm color — and concentrate on the focal area. While that wash is still wet, I then follow up with another pour of an analogous color and maybe a third color, letting the colors blend on the paper. I usually stay with two or three analogous colors while the paper is wet since too many colors can get muddy.

After I've allowed the warm

washes to dry thoroughly, I go in with one or more pourings of cool, usually complementary color. It can be very difficult to pour complementary colors because they tend to gray each other if I'm not careful. By making sure the initial warm colors are dry and roughly directing the direction of the cool washes, I prevent the complements from glazing over and neutralizing each other too much.

Developing the piece may take as many as 10-15 pourings before the masking fluid is removed. This is where the painting begins to take on a life of its own. It is important that I not try to push it in one certain direction, but let the pours intuitively create their own shapes and movements in the rectangle.

Developing light and texture

After I've decided I've poured enough colors, I remove the masking fluid and redraw the composition. Creativity takes over and I attempt to use the shapes that have been made by both the masking fluid and the color pours. I call this “letting the painting speak to me”. I often work from a series of photos at this point, possibly even recreating the composition by developing the drawing to work with the shapes and colors that have begun to emerge in the painting. I sometimes change the subject matter if I see something different in the play of whites and colors in front of me.

Then it is time to pour more colors, to brighten the focal area or even get some color into parts of the painting that were created by the poured masking fluid. At this point, I am seeking to develop plays of light and texture through an area by linking and unifying some of the hard-edged shapes left by the masking fluid.

Art in the making Pouring to preserve an abstract play of light

This demonstration shows how I begin by pouring color over my partially masked surface to create a unified, dynamic underpainting. I then develop the image in greater detail, using both positive and negative painting.

What the artist uses

Support:

Hot press watercolor board

Brushes:

1" Flat
¾" Flat
#10 Round
#6 Round

Spray bottle

Plastic paint containers with lids for pouring

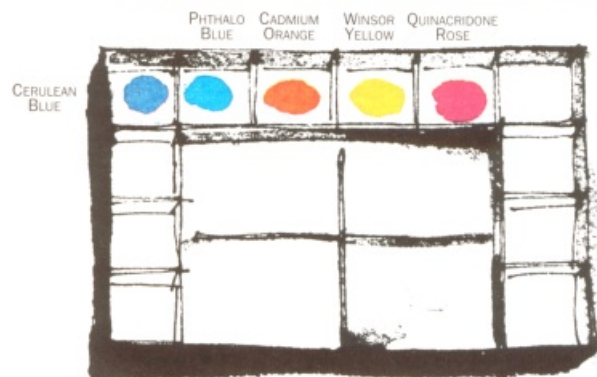
Plenty of paper towels

Facial tissue

Eyedropper

Old brushes

Masking fluid





I Am The Vine, watercolor on hot press watercolor board, 12 x 18" (31 x 46cm)

— "Jellyfish No. 1"



1 Pouring the masking fluid

After drawing the basic shapes on hot press watercolor board, I poured the masking fluid directly on the board in a small puddle. I then manipulated it into a random, interesting pattern by spraying it with the atomiser or moving it with an old brush.



2 Washing in light values

After the masking fluid dried, I wet the entire watercolor board and began pouring on a mix of diluted Winsor Yellow where I knew I wanted the image to be lighter in value.

“I usually make several small pours of masking fluid and move them around until they connect and run off the edges of the painting rectangle. My goal is to preserve an abstract play of light throughout the composition.”



Testing colors, one-two-three

I spend a lot of time with preliminary color studies. Although I am considered a value painter, I feel that there should always be a unified color scheme in every painting. Therefore, I find it useful to study color relationships in a work, especially with hues I haven't used together before. I begin this process with a simple color study on a sheet of 140 gsm watercolor paper. I wet the paper and then add analogous colors next to each other in a wheel pattern, warm to cool. I also determine my complementary mix for grays and darks in the painting. Thanks to these color studies, I can confidently move ahead with a new color palette.

Finishing with the brush

After several more pours of color, I finish the painting with primarily negative painting in brushwork. I normally choose one area, often the focal point, and charge toward the dark in that area to help myself develop the value scheme.

Having at least one very dark area assists in the movement of the composition, so after I put in this dark (usually complementary colors of the color scheme in my poured colors), I have the entire value range in my painting. I have found this technique helps avoid the tendency to overwork certain areas and keeps the entire painting lighter and fresher.

I then work backward to finish the rest of the painting, going from dark to light. Using a combination of both positive and negative painting, I enhance the shapes and add a few details as needed.

Why pouring works

Such a loose, intuitive approach to painting can easily get out of hand, so I keep some basic principles in



3 Letting the pigment flow

Tilting the board while spraying the yellow wash with water encouraged the color to spread around.



4 Blending wet washes

Before the first color dried, I poured on a bright dilution of Quinacridone Rose and let it mix with the yellow. Again, moving the mix around with water from the spray bottle allowed the colors to blend. To drain off the excess wash, I tilted the board and let the wet paint run off a corner.



Blue Jug with Lilies, watercolor on 300 gsm hot press watercolor paper, 14 x 21" (36 x 54cm)



5 Dropping in on brighter color

My initial washes were beginning to dry and soften in color, but while they were still wet enough to blend, I added small amounts of more saturated color with an eyedropper to brighten up a few areas.



6 Developing a glow

I then repeated the pouring process with Cadmium Orange, bringing the focus to the top of the rectangle with bright color. Combined with the first pours of Winsor Yellow and Quinacridone Rose, the orange gives the surface a nice glow.

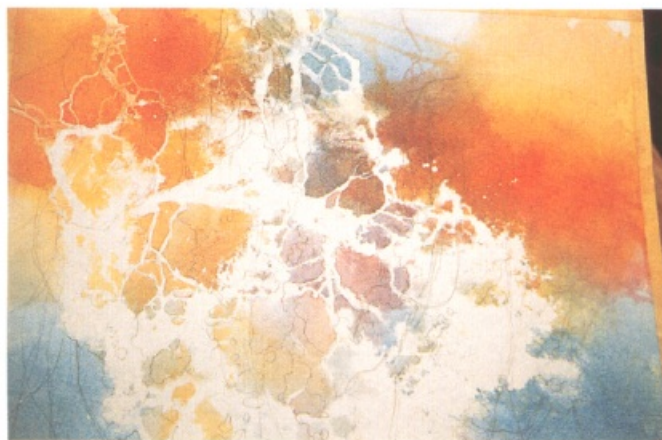
“... a limited color scheme works best when pouring paint. While I may add a complementary color for the darks in later stages, I usually lean toward analogous color schemes for unity.”



***Gloxinia*, watercolor on 300 gsm hot press watercolor paper, 10 x 14" (26 x 36cm)**

mind as I work to ensure pleasing results. For one thing, I think of every painting as an abstract painting, so I concentrate on creating and defining interesting, unusual shapes. Along those same lines, I count on a strong value scheme to provide the kind of structure that pulls viewers into my paintings. And finally, I have found that a limited color scheme works best when pouring paint. While I may add a complementary color for the darks in later stages, I usually lean toward analogous color schemes for unity.

With these essentials in mind, my pouring technique frees me from relying too heavily on my photographic references and pushes me to find unique solutions to each new beginning. While it is not a new approach to watercolor painting, it can be a great way to leave my comfort zone and reach new heights in my creativity. In fact, that may be the best thing about it — letting the colors flow and mix on their own opens up a whole new world of possibilities. □



7 Balancing with a complement

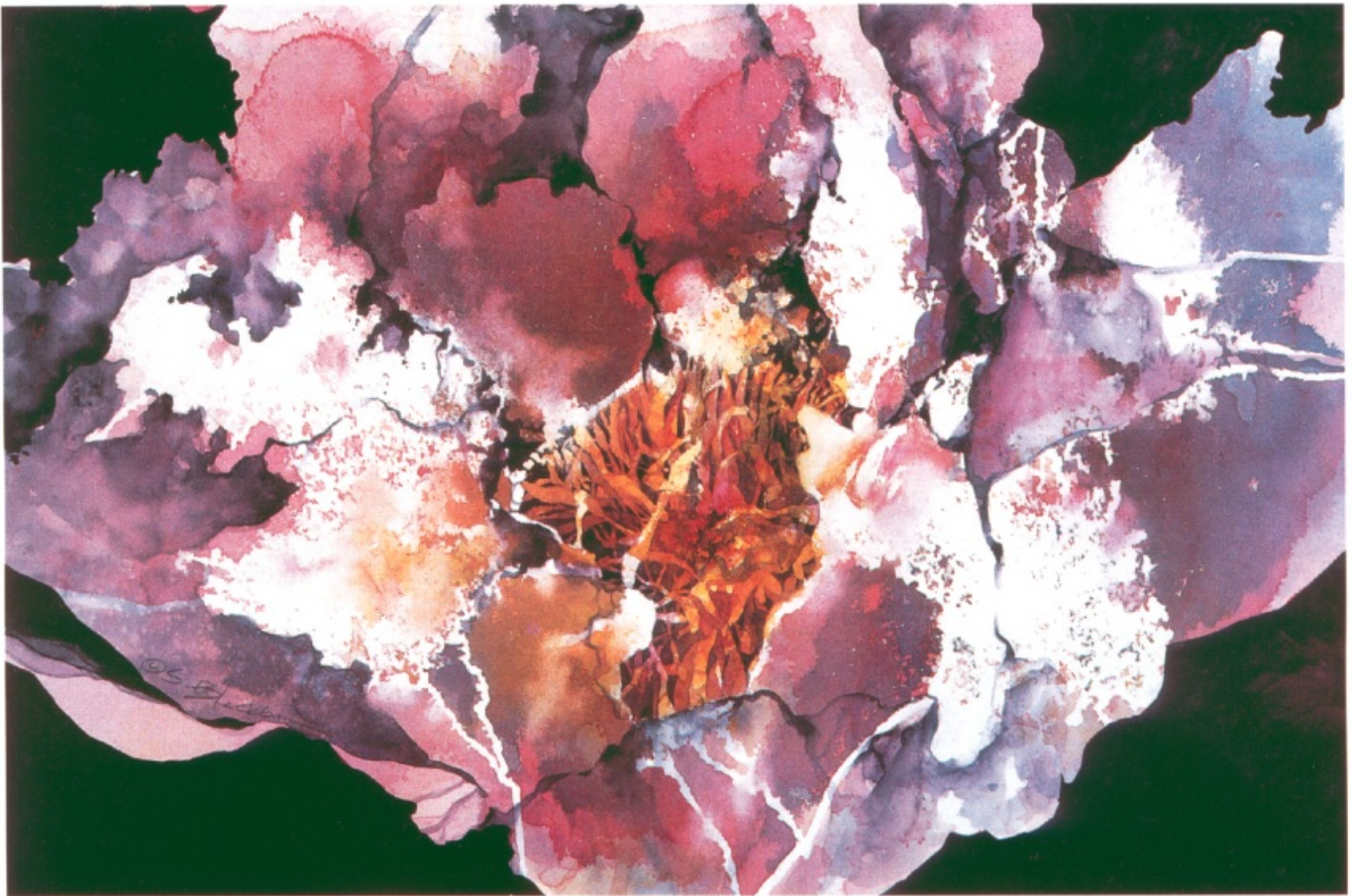
To offset the initial warm passages, I introduced the complementary Cerulean Blue at the bottom of the painting. The challenge was to allow the cooler colors to glaze over the warmer tones without graying down areas. I accomplished this by pouring the blue in from a distant corner and tilting the board to direct and control how much of the cool color glazed over the warm tones. Then I strengthened the upper warm colors with additional pours of Cadmium Orange, letting the paper dry between pours. When the entire surface was thoroughly dry, I removed the masking fluid.



8 Establishing the composition

Next, I carefully redrew the entire composition. Following the play of whites left by the masking along with the color washes, I reshaped some areas and changed the original drawing completely in other ways to fit the pattern created in the pouring stage. From here on, I used my reference photos as a guide only, letting what had happened with the pours govern where I went next.

I then added a pour of Winsor Yellow at the top. After that dried, I darkened the upper middle area and some of the white areas with pours of Cerulean Blue to shadow them and give them depth. When the pours were dry, I began to develop shapes with brushwork, using both positive and negative shapes in my deepest values.



Peony, watercolor on hot press watercolor board, 19 x 30" (49 x 76cm)



9 Playing the value scale

As usual, I stopped to do a small value study at this point. Normally, the value study is done at the beginning of the creative process, but it works better for me to wait until some of the movement in the piece has been established so that I have the freedom to change it throughout the life of the painting. Using my preserved whites and that dark gray-blue as the established ends of my full value scale, I continued to build off them with more negative painting in the same limited palette of yellow-orange and blue.



10 Completing with detail

Finally, I tinted the tentacles with warm tones and finished the painting with more negative painting in the white areas and on the jellyfish bodies. "Jellyfish No. 1" (watercolor on hot press watercolor board, 12 x 18" or 31 x 46cm) was complete.

Art in the making Controlling washes — “Kelp Forest”



Part of the excitement of the pouring technique is the unpredictable results. However, the washes can and should be somewhat controlled in terms of where the light and dark values appear in the final composition.





**Acacia Fern, watercolor on hot press watercolor board,
30 x 20" (76 x 51cm)**



About the artist

Stephen Blackburn is a watercolorist from South Bend, Indiana. He seeks to share his love of Jesus Christ and the anticipation of beauty in the world through the bright colors and exciting shapes in his paintings.

With a degree in architectural engineering, Stephen worked in the construction industry as a draftsman for many years while he refined his painting style and built a list of clients. He has been painting professionally for about 15 years, the last six as a full-time artist. He has studied under many artists, including Frank Webb, Roland Roycraft and Joe Fettingis. Now a teacher himself, Stephen has taught his unique style of watercolor in classes and workshops in the Midwest area for the past several years.

Stephen's extensive list of shows includes the Penrod Arts Fair, Indianapolis, Indiana; Art on the Bluff, St. Joe, Michigan; the Lakefront Art Festival, Michigan City, Michigan; St. James Court Art Show, Louisville, Kentucky; and New East Side Artworks, Chicago, Illinois. He has won awards in regional and national shows, including the Grand Prize in *International Artist's* floral competition for his piece entitled "Sunbathe".

Currently, Stephen's work can be seen at the Water Lily Art Gallery in Syracuse, Indiana, and the Radius Gallery in Niles, Michigan. Some of his works have also been published previously and in two books, *Best of Watercolor — Painting Composition* and *Best of Watercolor 3*. To see more of his work, visit his web site at www.starrdesigns-studio.com