

**Selling in Outdoor Fairs
Prints Based on Paintings
An Emerging Artist**

**Telling
Stories**
in Still-Life Paintings



COVER:
Yellow Lilies With
Kumquats and Green
Apple (detail)
by Susan Fleming Hotard



After stumbling upon a small art academy in San Diego, this young Californian connected with a group of gifted artists dedicated to traditional drawing and painting. He is now well on his way to becoming an important figurative painter.

Emerging Artist: **Aaron
Westerberg**

by M. Stephen Doherty

"I JUST HAPPENED TO SEE reproductions of some drawings on a flyer advertising Watts Atelier that blew me away, so I checked it out," remembers Aaron Westerberg, a young man who peppers his conversation with 20-something phrases and still reveals a mature sense of himself as an artist. The Watts Atelier he discovered is a small art academy in San Diego run by Jeffrey R. Watts (www.wattsatelier.com). "I entered the school with the idea that I would become a commercial illustrator," Westerberg continues, "but I was introduced to a whole new world of art and artists. I spent two years studying drawing and painting with Jeff, and then I moved closer to Los Angeles, where I could expand my studies at the California Art Institute (CAI), where he trained."

When Westerberg enrolled as a student and later became a teacher at the CAI, in Westlake Village, he began

an association with a group of young artists studying there and at other small art schools throughout Southern California that emphasizes traditional approaches to drawing and painting (www.calartist.com). He also became associated with several important galleries and with the California Art Club, a well-established organization that fosters an appreciation of traditional art and provides opportunities for artists to exhibit and study, as well as interact with one another.

Although the influences and styles vary among the artists gaining attention from collectors and museum curators, there is a common appreciation for working directly from nature, whether that occurs on a plein air excursion into the mountains or in a small studio crammed with easels and a model stand. "The students in my classes have the same expectations and enthusiasm that brought me to the school a few

years ago," Westerberg explains. "They need to understand how to analyze what they see and how to represent that with charcoal or paint. For me, the best way to teach and learn this is by working directly from life, whether it's a figure or landscape."

Westerberg is quick to point out that there are subtle differences in the way he and his students work as compared to artists associated with academic ateliers in other regions of the country or in Europe. "First, we don't use the sight-size method, and we put more emphasis on tonal drawing than on linear mark-making," he explains. Sight-size is a method of drawing and painting in which the size and proportions of the actual subject and the two-dimensional rendering are exactly the same when the artwork is viewed from a measured distance.

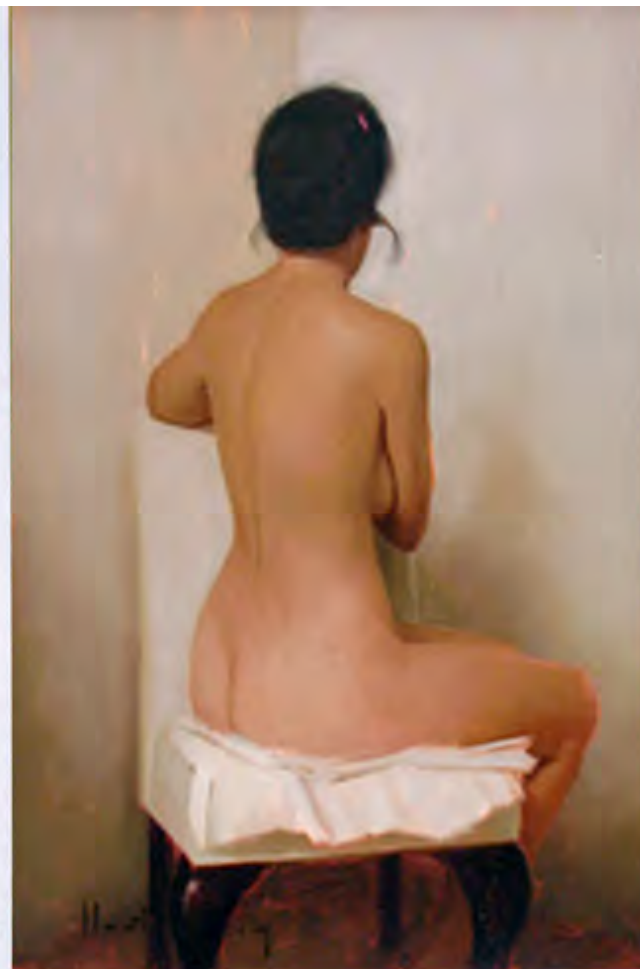
The Russian
2004, oil, 14 x 9.
Private collection.



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"We handle charcoal in much the same way one would manipulate a paintbrush," Westerberg continues. "We establish the boundaries of the figure with a few lines, but we immediately block in the big shapes and relate one to another. For example, we might start by drawing the head and then use that as a unit of measure as we move down the form. The drawing is done with a stick of charcoal sharpened so we can either make distinct edges with the point or broad strokes with the side of the charcoal. We balance hard and soft edges in much the same way we would if we were using oil paint. And when we teach these skills, we constantly emphasize the importance of accurate drawing."

Westerberg talks about being influenced by artists such as Nicolai Fechin (1881–1955), John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), and Joaquin Sorolla (1863–1923), whose style of brushwork was gestured, tonal, and heavily textured, as opposed to artists such as Ingres and Gérôme, whose marks were sharp and tightly defined. "One of the most important aspects of drawing and painting is the effect of light," he says, "and I'm less interested in a storyline that might be connected with the subject than I am about the way light establishes relationships between shapes, values, and colors. If I think about the identity or symbolism of the subject, it is only to make sure it isn't dated by the fashion of the



clothes, hair, or setting. I prefer to paint figures and still lifes that are timeless. I want to let the viewer determine the story."

Ironically, one of the ways Westerberg achieves this timeless look in his artwork is through the use of technology that is decidedly 21st-century vintage. After starting a drawing or painting from life, he takes digital photographs of the models, manipulates and adjusts the images in his computer, and generates prints to use as reference material for completing the work. "The digital images are useful for a number of reasons, one of which is that they give me an opportunity to work when the model is not available,"

the artist explains. "But they can also assist in determining the composition of the drawings or paintings. I often take a bunch of photographs of a subject, download them, and then experiment with the different croppings. I also try out different color settings, sometimes increasing the intensity and other times subduing it.

"I've also worked with scanned photographs in painting portraits," Westerberg continues. "I was once asked to paint a posthumous portrait with the only reference material available being a poor-quality black-and-white head shot of the person. I scanned it, colored it, and used other models to compose a three-quarter

figure composite that I could use for the painting.”

However modern Westerberg's procedures may be, his painting technique is quite traditional. “I would characterize my painting style as straightforward,” he explains. “I prefer to work wet-in-wet without modifying the paint with oils or medium. I apply relatively thick strokes of oil color onto the toned canvas, trying not to overwork the paint and thereby retaining a sense of spontaneity and freshness.

“Normally I start painting from the focal point of the composition and work my way out from there, always judging values, color temperatures,

and sizes against that center of interest,” Westerberg continues. “I constantly assess how the viewer's eyes will travel across the surface of the canvas and try to create pathways for them to follow. I also bring some elements into sharp focus and allow others to remain soft and less defined. I want to direct the viewer so my intentions for the picture are clearly understood.”

Westerberg often creates monochromatic paintings of figures using variations of warm and cool red oil colors, usually terra rosa (warm) and Venetian red (cool). “I essentially draw the subject with the brush and wipe out the highlights with a rag or clean brush,”

he explains. “I use thin transparent tones to establish the darks and use the color of the canvas to establish my midtones. The technique lends itself to accurately recording shapes and edges, so I block in those shapes, refine them with the brush or a rag, and manipulate the balance between the warm and cool tones. It's similar to drawing, but I can use color temperature and other aspects of oil painting.”

Nicolai Fechin inspired Westerberg's approach to drawings. “I saw a collection of Fechin drawings on a textured toned paper, and they inspired me to experiment with similar papers,” he explains. “I wound up using Utrecht



ABOVE
Jen's Corner
2005, oil, 12 x 9.
Private collection.

LEFT
Belena
2001, oil, 16 x 12.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Seated Nude
2002, oil, 30 x 20.
Courtesy Wendt Gallery,
Laguna Beach,
California.



LEFT
Nude in Blue
2005, oil, 16 x 16.
Courtesy Wendt Gallery,
Laguna Beach,
California.

BELOW
Buddha Still Life
2003, oil, 20 x 16.
Private collection.



OPPOSITE PAGE
Anna With Wrap
2004, charcoal on rice
paper, 14 x 8. Courtesy
Wendt Gallery, Laguna
Beach, California.

“[Students] need to understand how to analyze what they see and how to represent that with charcoal or paint. For me, the best way to teach and learn this is by working directly from life, whether it's a figure or landscape.”

rice paper that has the same irregularly textured, cream-colored surface. Because it is relatively thin and has very little sizing, I can't erase marks without permanently altering the surface, so I work very carefully and accurately from the start so I don't have to make changes. It actually takes me much longer to create a charcoal drawing than a red oil painting.”

Although Westerberg has well-considered ideas about what he is doing as an artist, he remains open to further growth and improvement. “I believe it's important for artists to keep learning and developing, especially in the early stages of their careers,” he says. “I feel confident about what I'm doing, but I'm constantly

challenging myself to improve. That happens by doing a lot of painting, interacting with other artists, and studying the great artists of both the present and the past.” One way he connects with like-minded artists is by participating in a weekly studio session at the California Art Institute.

Westerberg was fortunate to gain early exposure for his work through the Morseburg Galleries, in West Hollywood, California. “Jeff Morseburg is extremely supportive of a whole group of younger artists in Southern California, and he has helped us understand the entire process of preparing work for exhibition and presenting it to collectors,” the artist explains. “I now have a better sense of how the art world

operates—I realize it's very important to have that communication link with others who are interested in figurative art, and that's why I have set up a website [www.westerberg-fineart.com] for myself.”

When teaching students at the CAI, Westerberg often advises them to have patience. “I constantly remind them this is a gradual process that requires constant discipline and effort,” he says. “I urge them to learn to draw and paint pictures that reveal evidence of a well-trained eye. To quote Fechin, ‘A high degree of expertise in technique (draftsmanship) always has had and always will have a predominate place in art. The subject, by itself, has value only according to the mode of the day: tomorrow it will be superseded by a new one. With the passage of time the subject loses much of its meaning, but the fine execution of it retains its value.’”

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