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Skaters on the Brandywine (reversed, detail; oil, 60x60) by Randall Exon

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Aaron Westerberg creates
visual poetry with
timeless figurative scenes.

fleeting moments

BY LOUISE B. HAFESH

I ORIGINALLY WANTED to be an illustrator until I saw the work of John Singer Sargent," recalls contemporary realist Aaron Westerberg. "Sargent could say more with a brushstroke than most artists could say with 50. He painted the simple way."

Transitions

Looking back to the time of that pivotal discovery, Westerberg recalls: "I had entered the Watts Atelier of the Arts (near San Diego) with the idea of becoming a commercial illustrator, having spent a good deal of my high school years copying *Mad* magazine and comic books. That plan swiftly changed, however, after I was introduced to a whole new world of art."

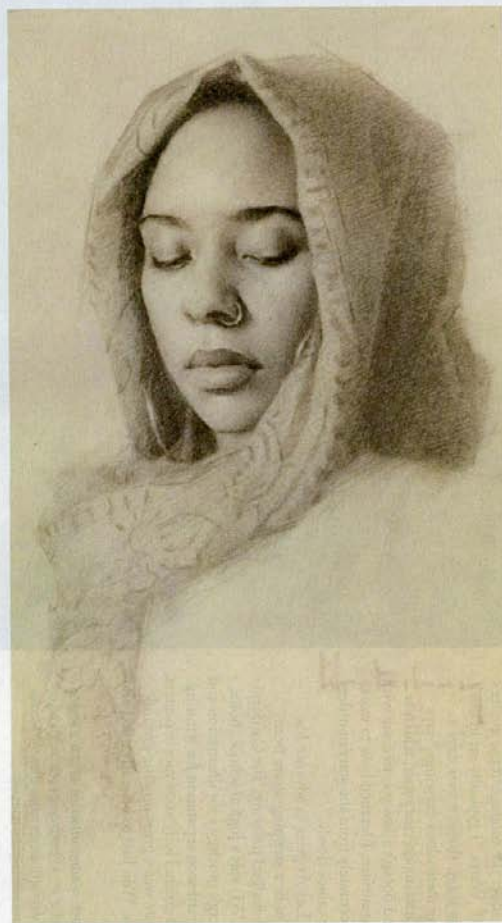
For two years Westerberg fine-tuned his drawing skills under the tutelage of the atelier's owner, Jeffrey R. Watts. "I typically sat in one spot eight hours a day, three or four days a week, producing meticulous drawings," says Westerberg. "Drawing on rice paper, which is super fragile and doesn't allow you to erase without marring the surface, I learned how to work carefully and accurately from the start in order to bring up the values slowly."

A move to Los Angeles to advance his studies proved to be a stepping-stone from drawing to full-fledged painting. The California Art Institute (CAI) was a logical school choice, given Westerberg's proclivity for illustration and the academy's hard-won reputation for winning commissions to create Hollywood movie posters. "The Institute was a great proving ground," Westerberg says. "You had to be really good and

RIGHT: In *Admiration* (oil, 48x24), a limited palette helps Westerberg keep the focus on the woman in white rather than the Nicolai Fechin painting she admires.

ILLUSTRATION BY
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ABOVE: *Anna in Veil* (charcoal, 14x7) was drawn on rice paper. "Drawing on such a thin surface takes a lot of patience," says Westerberg. "This piece took about two days to complete."

Visual Poetry Step by Step



1. During the early stages of a painting, I'm concerned with the placement of the compositional elements. These I draw on the canvas with a flat brush, which gives me a very fine line. I want everything to hook together rhythmically. You can see one long line from the hair through the neck and down through one of the main folds of the kimono.



2. I move on to a very basic block-in that allows me to see how the overall pattern of lights and darks is working.



3. Once I'm happy with the composition, I start painting with accurate color and value. Finishing one section at a time allows me to work wet-into-wet over an extended period of days.



ABOVE: *Furisode Kimono* (oil, 40x20)

really fast to successfully compete against other schools and produce fine art movie posters. The school not only taught the fundamentals but also prepared us to break down essentials quickly while making the work look dynamic," he says of the CAI's fast-track immersion philosophy.

At CAI, Westerberg began to understand color and painting. Having started out creating intense, full-value renderings, he easily progressed to small monochromatic drawings in oil and later, as he became more confident in the medium, began to incorporate color.

The program also provided valuable mentoring and teaching opportunities. "Classes at CAI included students of all skill levels," says Westerberg. "Teachers were the masters, but they often called on those who were getting good in class to work with beginners." A star pupil, Westerberg was afforded that honor, the

payoff being that, over time, he built up a following and easily transitioned into a teaching position at CAI.

Believing that "you get your wings doing still life," Westerberg compiled a body of paintings in that genre, which helped him secure space in a collaborative show at the prestigious Wendt Gallery in Laguna Beach, California. "Once I'd got my foot in the door and had some semblance of recognition," says Westerberg, "I felt more comfortable taking on the figure, and I began working on a nucleus of paintings for my first solo show, "Vanity," held at the American Legacy Fine Arts gallery in Pasadena, California." The young artist was off and running.

Poetry in Motion

Today, Westerberg is known for his sensitive and deeply mysterious figurative scenes that

emanate a moody, timeless sensibility. "I particularly enjoy painting women," he says. "I think they're the most beautiful and elegant subjects, and I want to immortalize them in paint. To me, watching women move is like experiencing visual poetry."

In many ways Westerberg's paintings, too, are like poetry—intentionally so. His subject is often turned away in an intriguing pose, and his settings exhibit a mystique. When looking at his work, one tends to invent an imaginary story line. "I want the viewer to interpret the scene, fill in the blanks and wonder how the pose came about or what was going on," says Westerberg. "I don't like over-the-top symbolism, though. I prefer to let people interact with and interpret the work."

One of the artist's favorites of his own paintings, *Admiration* (pages 40–41), epitomizes those qualities. "I composed the piece

WESTERBERG ON TEACHING

"Teaching makes for a rewarding environment all around. It's actually one of the best ways to learn. I often brought in books of my favorite artists to inspire the class. Invariably, students would point out specific details that I hadn't noticed, and I discovered something new, too."

WESTERBERG ON FIGURES

"No matter the genre, I try to include people. A nicely rendered head can hold any painting. Even in my still lifes, I'll put in a photo or some subtle figurative reference since, for me, every flower, apple or pear is a portrait."

in the studio under natural light and painted it in a very direct way, wet-into-wet," he says. Prior to starting, he did a small study of approximately 6x3 inches in order to work out the composition and color. "I wanted to convey a quiet moment, an experience everyone could relate to and share," says Westerberg, adding that the piece presented a few difficulties: "I especially struggled to make the focus be the woman rather than the painting by Nicolai Fechin." The near-monochromatic quality of Fechin's work helped Westerberg attain his goal. "Using a limited palette," he says, "sets the painting apart from an ordinary scene by directing the viewer toward the focal point, richer patterns and colored areas of the painting."

Theory Put to Practice

Challenged to capture form, color and light, while keeping his approach somewhat classical, Westerberg believes that, if you paint often and work hard enough, your voice will come



Westerberg's Materials

Oils: Utrecht yellow ochre, ultramarine blue; Winsor & Newton cadmium yellow pale, lemon yellow, cadmium red, terra rosa, burnt sienna, alizarin crimson, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, permanent mauve; Gamblin cadmium orange, cobalt blue; Rembrandt raw umber, viridian green, ivory black, king's blue; Lefranc & Bourgeois titanium white

Palette: large piece of double-paned glass with a piece of toned canvas underneath

Brushes: Robert Simmons bristle brushes of all sizes; Rosemary & Co long flats, series 279; kolinsky red sable rounds

Other: Palette knives; clove oil: "I use clove oil to extend the drying time of my paints. The oil doesn't have to be mixed with the paint—just in the same enclosed space. When I finish painting for the day, I place a little dish of clove oil in the center of my palette and then close the palette off from the air with the lid. This extends the oil paint for a week or two." —A.W.

through. "Patience, for a painter, is key," he says. "If you don't have it, you can't make breakthroughs in your art or in life."

Toward that aim, Westerberg finds particular inspiration in the words of a favorite painter, Nicolai Fechin: "With the passage of time, the subject loses much of its meaning, but the fine execution of it retains its value."

To accomplish his own "fine execution," Westerberg prefers to work from life, especially for his larger studio paintings. "I usually start with the idea, whether from a sketch or something I saw a model do and want to re-create," says Westerberg. "From there I begin to design and compose the painting, positioning the model to determine a good pose and composition." Often, in order to cut costs, he sets up his first session as a digital photo shoot, positioning the model and props as if he were going to paint, but instead taking reference photos.

"Working with Photoshop," says Westerberg, "I can play around with the shots,



ABOVE: "I've fitted 2-inch screws on the top and bottom of my easel where my canvas sits. The screws hold the canvas in place, allowing me unencumbered brush movement. Because the top of the canvas doesn't rest against the top easel support, I can hook a cane over the canvas edge to use as a mahlstick."

RIGHT: "Surlly Frenchman" (oil, 12x9) is based on a photograph I took in Paris," says Westerberg. "The guy wasn't too happy about the shot, as you can see. Once I told him I was an artist and might do a painting from the photo, he was a little more friendly."



Meet Aaron Westerberg

From 2000 to 2005, Aaron Westerberg taught at the California Art Institute outside San Diego. Since then he's been teaching figure drawing and portrait and figure painting at the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art. In 2002 he was listed in *Southwest Art's* "Twenty-One Under Thirty-One," and in 2007 he was named one of the best 24 artists under 40 by *The Artist's Magazine*. In May of this year, he received an honorable mention from the Oil Painters of America National Exhibition in Scottsdale, Arizona. Westerberg is represented by the Gardner Colby Gallery in Naples, Florida, and the Legacy Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona. Visit his website at www.westerberg-fineart.com.

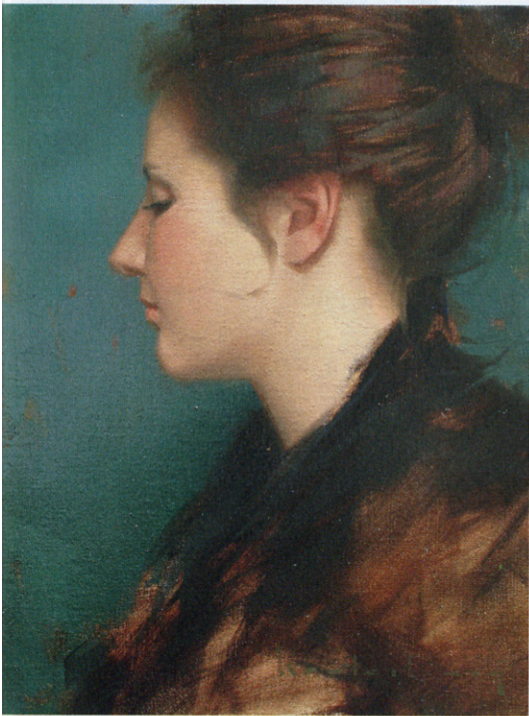


whether—and why—the setup is working," says Westerberg. "No matter how large or small a painting may be, if the composition as a whole isn't in harmony with itself, the painting won't be good, regardless of how well rendered it is."

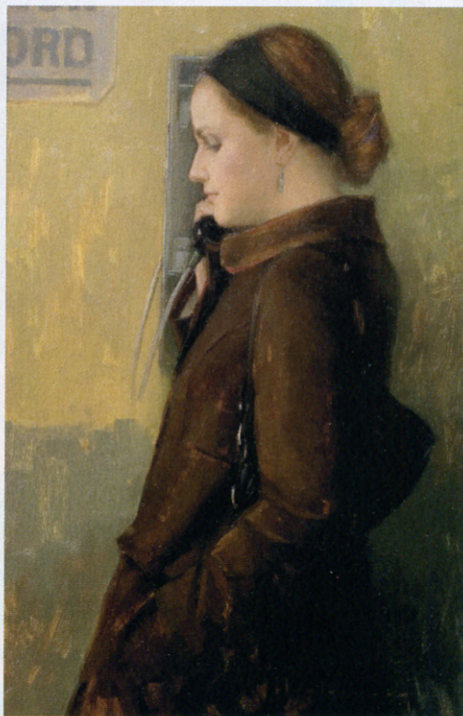
With the composition worked out, Westerberg can estimate the dimensions of his painting, so he selects the linen and stretches his canvas. "From there I usually do a simple linear brush drawing in oil, focusing on proportion and balance."

Moving forward, he still prefers not to do a full-value rendering at this point. Rather, he does just enough of a block-in to get started.

BELOW: Except for the skin tones and blue-green background, Westerberg purposely kept the paint very thin in *Jen in Green* (oil, 14x11). "I was trying to get as much variation as possible without applying the paint too thickly," he says. "I wanted to let the painting breathe."



BELOW: "In *Café Conversation* (oil, 20x16), I was trying to balance the new with the old," says Westerberg. "The café was actually closing the day I did this painting."



Working this way, Westerberg gets a good grasp of the painting's all-important focal point: "Once the center of interest is established," he says, "I strive to make sure that nothing will take away from it." When satisfied with the design, the artist concentrates more on value and color, finishing each area before moving on. "I use very little medium and prefer working wet-into-wet because, when I'm finished, I really don't like to work back into a painting." (See Visual Poetry Step by Step, pages 42–43.)

Every Stroke Counts

When discussing his work and painting process, Westerberg shifts seamlessly into instructor mode, a role for which he's in great demand. "Formal training is very important," he says. "It's how you learn to communicate without words. I compare it to writing. If you can't

form a sentence, how can you write a story? Above all, education gives you varied tools to express yourself."

The concept of "varied tools" is key. "The more variation you have in a painting, the better," says Westerberg. "I encourage my students, as they attempt to represent nature, to alternate brushstrokes from thick to thin, from drybrush to splashy watercolorish applications, and even to wipe off paint or let a toned canvas peer through occasionally. I tell them to use whatever means they can to keep things interesting." He heeds his own instruction: "My ultimate aim with every brushstroke is to capture those precious, fleeting moments in time." ■

LOUISE B. HAFESH is an artist, writer and contributing editor for *The Artist's Magazine*. See examples of her work at www.artworks-site.com and www.paintersportal.blogspot.com.

web
EXTRA

To see more of Westerberg's paintings, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/aaron-westerberg.