

Aaron Westerberg: Creating a Monochromatic Figure Study

*In a recent California workshop,
Aaron Westerberg showed students how to apply
their drawing skills to creating oil paintings by developing
a monochromatic grisaille using one warm and one cool red
and handling a brush as if it were a drawing tool.*

BY MATTHEW MARCHANT

OPPOSITE PAGE
Aaron Westerberg worked on a
student's canvas to demonstrate
his technique during a recent
workshop at Cope Studios, in
Glendale, California.



OPPOSITE PAGE
The instructor showed examples of paintings creating using a limited palette to help explain what he would be teaching during the workshop.

Aaron Westerberg is widely known throughout Southern California for what he calls monochromatic “red paintings,” which he creates using a limited palette of terra rosa and Venetian red on a white canvas.

He recently taught a two-day workshop on his working process at Cope Studios, in Glendale, California. The instructor’s goal was to help artists concentrate on accurate drawing and effective value patterns before they took on the complicated issues associated with using a full palette of colors.

Westerberg immediately made workshop participants feel comfortable with the tools and technique they would be learning to employ. “Anyone can do this,” he said encouragingly. “It’s just drawing with a brush.” He then outlined the general process, saying that he would use an “open-grisaille” method, meaning that he would be working with thin washes of two oil colors on a white canvas. “The open method implies that the lightest values are established by the white substrate that remains visible and open even after thin glazes of color are applied over it,” he explained. “Conversely, a closed technique is one in which titanium white paint is used to create the opaque tints and black paint marks the deepest values.

“I did hundreds of open paintings when I was a student of Jeffrey Watts at the Watts Atelier of the Arts, in Encinitas, California,” Westerberg continued. “I first used thin mixtures of burnt umber to copy Frank Frazetta’s mostly monochromatic illustrations. Later I learned to work with other colors to paint from live models or from photographs, and I looked at paintings by Titian and J. W. Waterhouse to guide me through the process. Waterhouse used the equivalent of Conté crayons to achieve the same kind of effect we will establish with oils. The point of using the warm and cool reds is that they quickly create color vibration that corresponds to a full palette of colors. The finished red paintings are independent works of art, but they can also be used as underpaintings for pictures developed with a full palette.”

Westerberg then showed workshop participants how to begin the open-painting process by applying a thin tone of Winsor & Newton terra rosa oil color to a white canvas and setting it aside to dry. “The key is to keep the initial paint very transparent by putting a minimal amount of color on a bristle brush,” he explained. “Eventually we want to erase the traces of oil paint with a kneaded eraser to restore the white of the canvas and thereby add highlights to the painting. Once the toned surface is dry, we’ll use thicker strokes of the terra rosa as a warm color for drawing the head and then use Winsor & Newton Venetian red as a cool color for the darker values in the hair and the shadow areas of the body.”

Westerberg considers his painting method to be very similar to drawing, which he believes can help artists who may be intimidated by oil paints. “Open grisaille bridges the gap between drawing and painting because you are learning to use a brush in much the same way you might use a pencil or stick of charcoal, but you also deal with color temperature,” he said. “The drawing action is one of scumbling more than it is applying shapes of color that would later be refined with lost and found edges.”

The instructor also explained that restricting the palette to two shades of red would help students understand how to manage a composition of values. “If we aren’t experienced with a full palette of colors, we have a tendency to push the relationships by using black to mark the darkest values and titanium white for the highlights,” he noted. “The problem with doing that is it can eliminate any sense of atmosphere and subtlety in a painting. It’s better to keep the half-tones and darks lighter and make judicious use of the highlights.” To emphasize that point, Westerberg showed students reproduc-



tions of paintings by Frank Duveneck and Waterhouse, and he compared those to closed grisaille paintings by Odd Nerdrum and Rembrandt.

Searching for other historic references to illustrate the merits of painting within a limited range of values, Westerberg talked about a number of his other favorite artists, including Velázquez. “Almost all of his underpaintings were open grisailles, and Velázquez was a master of adding a light opaque over a transparent structure,” he explained. “You can find similar underpaintings if you look closely at works by Richard Schmid, Dennis Miller Bunker, John Singer Sargent, and Thomas Wilmer Dewing.”

After the preliminary discussions, Westerberg began a demonstration using Robert Simmons Signet filbert No. 4

bristle brushes. He first loaded his brush with thinned terra rosa oil color and pinched it with a paper towel to remove most of the pigment. “Stay as light as possible during this beginning stage, and concentrate on the big shape of the model,” he advised. “This is really just drawing with a paintbrush, so all the principles of drawing apply.”

Westerberg talked about finding the focal point in his demonstration painting and deciding how to develop each area of interest. He explained that in this particular demonstration he would focus on the model’s torso. “Every line I put down in a drawing is a line in a story,” he commented. “Each one is helping me convey a specific message about my response to the person who is modeling.”

As the instructor applied paint to his demonstration



TOP
Westerberg began a demonstration on a toned canvas. Throughout the demonstration he described the phases of his working process and posed questions to the students to keep them engaged.

ABOVE
The instructor used terra rosa oil color to establish the warm midtone values in his painting.

WESTERBERG'S MONOCHROMATIC PALETTE

For his red paintings, Westerberg uses Venetian red and terra rosa, colors which have different properties.

Venetian red is a raw earth red that has a slight tendency toward orange. It is made from natural or synthetic iron oxide and is also known as red ochre and light red.

Terra rosa is formulated with synthetic iron oxide, and is extremely permanent.



LEFT
Westerberg (below) reviewed a small compositional sketch with a workshop participant.

making thoughtful artistic choices," he said. "That's one of the important things you learn as an art student—how to make the right choices between possible variations in the colors, textures, lines, edges, and values. What separates the great painters from everyone else is the way they made wise choices given the options available. In all artistic endeavors, the main question on your mind should be, 'How can I say more with less?' As you gain more experience you can learn from your mistakes and remember what works and what doesn't. It's always a process of trial and error."

During this drawing stage of the demonstration, Westerberg used two bristle brushes, one to apply color and one to scumble the surface with a drybrush technique that added texture. "I may use sable- or synthetic-hair brushes for line variation," he explained. "The key to maintaining control of your drawing is to limit the amount of paint on the brush and slowly build up the color."

"Focus on the big shapes, and remember that the composition should emphasize the different values within simple shapes," he added. "Err on the side of the values being too light. With each new stroke of paint, ask yourself if the additional oil color detracts from what you are trying to say. Don't lose sight of what it is you want to convey to the viewer."

During model breaks, the instructor took the opportunity to reveal tips that could help students through the painting process. For example, he noted that he was simply working within his value range, making sure his big statements of light and dark remained. "In order to pull out my lights, I use a kneaded eraser and paper towels to dab the areas I want to lighten," he explained. "I think about all of the planes of the form and keep in mind that every plane should have a different value. Follow what you see, not what you think you know."

Once Westerberg had a solid drawing with a full range of values, he added cool, dark accents using the Venetian red, aiming for variations in the dark accents and a level of vibration between the colors. After getting his demonstration to a level of finish, the instructor asked students to start on their own monochromatic paintings, beginning with a basic thumbnail value sketch that would serve as preparation for a solid composition of shapes and values.

As the students developed their paintings, Westerberg circulated through the studio, advising them when their oil color was too thick or too tightly controlled. He also

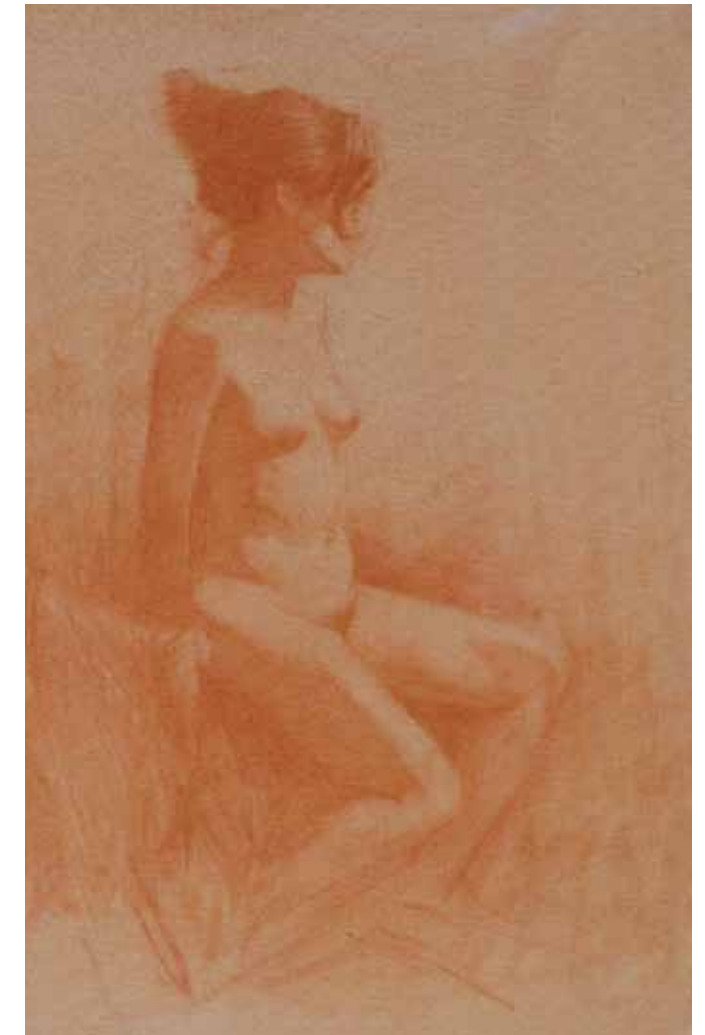
painting he posed a "pop-quiz" question. "What's the first priority when you begin a painting?" he asked. One student answered that it is the figure's hair. "Bingo," Westerberg said. "You should always start a painting by establishing your extremes. The model has very dark hair, which is an easy extreme to put down correctly. The other extremes are the gray color, and then you move to the richest, most dominant color, and finally to the lightest light. If you follow that sequence, your painting will have a value scale you can work with."

Throughout the demonstration Westerberg detailed his thought process for the students, allowing them to understand each choice he made. He explained that he intended to finish the painting by laying in opaque color while still reserving portions of the underpainting of transparent colors. One student asked how he would maintain the best qualities of the transparent colors as he applied opaque mixtures, and he explained that he could use a drybrush technique to establish a transition between the two areas. "It's all about



LEFT
Westerberg used Venetian red to paint the cool shadow shapes.

BELOW
Completed Demonstration
2010, oil, 15 x 7.
Collection the artist.



spent much of the time with the students focused on basic drawing fundamentals, stressing that a solid foundation in drawing is crucial to creating a successful painting. As the first day of the workshop drew to a close, the instructor encouraged students to resolve the basic composition of their paintings and keep the drawing light so that they could build up value separation during the second day of the class. “Look for rhythms, remember the simple shapes that make up the whole, resolve the big shapes, and refine smaller ones,” he said. “Remember that simple graphic shapes located in the right spots will tell the right story.”

On the second day students painted from the model for

the entire session. All participants worked diligently to apply the techniques Westerberg thoroughly demonstrated the day before. At the end of the workshop, one student commented that Westerberg “is a great teacher because he is clear and very easy to understand. He showed me how to prepare to create better value studies before starting my finished paintings.”

Another student echoed those sentiments. “I now understand how to start a painting and how to go from a drawing to a painting,” he said. “Aaron is an inspiring teacher, and it’s fun to just listen to his stories and the ideas he has for how you can improve your work.”

The workshop ended with the participants being better prepared to take that next step into painting. They learned that the secret to most representational painting is a solid value structure and a grasp of drawing fundamentals. “My objective was to provide the students with a bridge to painting from drawing,” Westerberg concluded. “We all need to become familiar with our tools and how to apply paint as we experiment with all of the techniques associated with using a limited range of colors. ■ ■

Matthew Marchant is an artist, writer, and former director of education of the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art.

About the Artist

Aaron Westerberg studied at Watts Atelier of the Arts, in Encinitas, California, and the California Art Institute, in Westlake Village. He is a member of Oil Painters of America and the Portrait Society of America, and his paintings have been included in a number of major gallery and museum exhibitions, including those organized by the California Art Club. For more information, visit his website at www.aaronwesterberg.com.

WESTERBERG'S WORK



ABOVE
Belena
2003, oil, 20 x 16.
Private collection.



ABOVE RIGHT
Sorolla
2003, oil, 10 x 8.
Collection the artist.



RIGHT
Lynda
2009, charcoal,
24 x 17. Collection
the artist.



ABOVE LEFT
Introspect
2008, oil, 24 x 16.
Private collection.

LEFT
Paul
2003, oil, 18 x 14.
Collection the artist.

ABOVE
Admiration
2007, oil, 48 x 24.
Private collection.