

Artist
To
Artist:

Eric Wiegardt

Renowned for his loose, direct approach, this artist has owned his own gallery since beginning his art career and has made a name for himself by continuing to pursue his own style and technique.

Watercolor: What prompted you to study art after earning a degree in civil engineering?

Eric Wiegardt: After working two years in the corporate world, I realized it was not for me and that I needed to make a change. I was very frustrated, as my creativity was constrained, and I realized that if I was going to work eight hours a day, I had better find a career that was interesting to me. The only engaging activity that I could come up with was art, so I chose to pursue that childhood interest.

WC: What experiences in your art training had the most impact on you?

EW: I studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago. The teachers there were fantastic; they knew how to teach and paint. The school taught a traditional approach to painting without cumbersome rules. Whereas I floundered with boredom in engineering school, I flourished in this environment. I made a point to study watercolor under Irving Shapiro, the academy's president and director, for two years. I graduated with a degree in fine arts. The school, and especially Mr. Shapiro, not only taught me the fundamentals of painting, but gave me a vision for future artistic expression. I am very grateful for the experience.

WC: How did you go about establishing yourself as a professional artist?



Fresh Tuna 2009, watercolor, 30 x 22

EW: The hard work and study at the Academy certainly set down a foundation of knowledge and experience and it really built up my confidence. Keep in mind that I entered the school with probably very average skills. I did however, have enough sense to know that art was a discipline, and I wanted to learn those time-tested fundamentals.



Ville Franche, France 2009, watercolor, 22 x 30

Upon graduation in 1985, I opened up my own art gallery and studio in my great grandfather's house. It is located just a few miles from where I grew up. Costs were kept to a minimum--no advertising, no rent, no framing. Word soon spread. I also was accepted into a few notable shows in New York, and the local newspaper helped make a big deal out of it. Two months after I graduated from the academy, my wonderful wife and I welcomed our first child and she didn't care to work outside the home anymore. So, with a lot of prayer, we were immediately able to make a living from the sale of my paintings. Having a family to support motivated me to get paintings out the door! I was very fortunate to have the encouragement and support of my wife, Ann. Otherwise the career change would have been difficult.



Camden Harbor 2009, watercolor, 14 x 18

WC: What would you say is unique about your approach to watermedia?

EW: At the Academy I became known for my loose, fresh watercolors. Painting an effective, loose watercolor takes a lot of discipline. I still find this technique fascinating today. Students come to my workshops to loosen up.

WC: To what extent do you use unconventional techniques vs. traditional ones?

EW: Procedurally, I am unconventional. I tackle the biggest, easiest, and simplest shapes first, regardless of their tonal value or depth in the picture plane. Why do the hardest parts first? Sticking to a rote method would be boring--I'm in for an adventure. I also first block in huge masses of loose shapes and tighten up with identifying

detail at the end. This is difficult for those who want to be more in control and see finished portions early in the process.



Rockland, Maine 2009, watercolor, 22 x 30

WC: What about your approach contributes to the effects you want to achieve?

EW: Watercolor is a medium that is intrinsically beautiful with a direct, loose technique. The variety of edge quality and blending of pigments can be exquisite. I achieve this by painting all at once on damp paper. It is a difficult way to paint, because no hesitation is allowed and the water in the brush has to be proportional to the evaporating water on the paper, otherwise back runs will occur or the edge will be too hard. It's a real juggling act, but a great intellectual ride.

WC: What do you emphasize in your workshops?



Snowpaths 2009, watercolor, 22 x 30. Private Collection

EW: I show techniques and elements of design that will help students to loosen up in their painting process. Many of my students are tired of hovering over a painting for hours constructing laborious detail. I show them how they can have fun again.



Loading at Twilight 2009, watercolor, 22 x 30

WC: What are the most common problems you see in watermedia paintings, and how do you address these problems with your students?

EW: The most common problem is overworking and adding too much detail. Detail never makes a painting work; it is only an embellishment. Too much of it easily ruins a painting. Muddiness in color is also a byproduct of overworking. We get to the core of building a good painting before considering detail.



Sintra, Portugal 2009, watercolor, 22 x 30

WC: When you judge the awards for a show, what are you looking for?

EW: First, I look for good design--strong shape and value construction. Secondly, I look for facility in handling the medium. I ask myself, Are



Lilies and Sunflowers 2009, watercolor, 30 x 22

the pigments fresh, or tired and overworked from uncertainty? Third, I want to see individuality from the artist. Does the artist have the courage to be himself or herself? Can the artist go beyond the rendering of a photograph?

WC: What advice can you offer to artists who want to open their own gallery?

EW: First and foremost, learn how to paint well by studying under a professional. Painting is much more than picture-making. Understanding design is critical. A great teacher will, by imparting design principles, unlock hidden avenues of self expression and a vision of what art can be. Also, as soon as possible, hire someone to run the business end. We are in this business to paint. I do, however, make myself available to meet the public on high-traffic days. Buying art is a very personal experience, and the artist's presence makes a big difference. I would suggest that the artist pray a lot too.