

Best Professional Practices for Dynamic Still Lives

New Jersey oil painter **Joe Gyurcsak** helps students understand how using a limited palette and keeping things simple makes for a painting that looks unified and convincing.

—
by Bob Bahr

Joe Gyurcsak, a veteran painter and art teacher, recently gave a demonstration at a regional arts guild in which he showed how using a limited palette can help unify the look of a still life painting. Gyurcsak, the resident artist at Utrecht Art Supplies, took an event at the Burlington County Art Guild as an opportunity to explore ideas behind a piece he admired—N.C. Wyeth's *The Dusty Bottle*, a 1924 oil painting that's in the collection of the Brandywine River Museum, in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Wyeth's somewhat mysterious piece lets a huge green glass bottle largely disappear into the darkness of the background. Gyurcsak sought to recreate the low values of Wyeth's painting—and also Wyeth's masterful way of wringing the most out of a simple composition. "Any old object can be interesting depending on how it is lit," Gyurcsak says. "Wyeth really shows how few objects you need to make a painting interesting. He didn't do too many still lifes, but the ones he did were gems. I've wanted to do a painting similar to Wyeth's



for a long time, and after 10 years of looking, I finally found a bottle like the one he painted—in an old antique shop in Easton, Maryland."

Gyurcsak decided to set up the still life arrangement on the floor about eight feet from his easel and to shine a warm light on the objects—the aforementioned glass bottle, a brownware jug, and a white plate with an orange on it—on the left side at floor level. The objects sat on a piece of black velvet that continued up behind them, creating a background that effectively absorbed almost all light. A second lamp, a balanced light fitted with a warm bulb and a cool bulb, shone on the artist's easel and trickled a weak secondary light on the objects' right side. Gyurcsak had previously tested



ABOVE
Tea Kettle
2007, oil on linen,
20 x 22. All artwork
in this article collection
is by the artist unless
otherwise indicated.



LEFT
Fruits of Life
2005, oil on linen,
14 x 19.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The Remains
2007, oil, 24 x 24.



many options to determine the placement that most effectively showed off the objects and the light effects. (The rest of the lights in the room were turned out.) He affixed a homemade cropping tool—a viewfinder—to the articulated arm of a modified lamp so that the artist’s view of the still life setup would remain consistent from his place at the easel. “I find that fixing the viewfinder to a stationary object is very valuable,” explains Gyurcsak. “It keeps you from changing the cropping distance. Students sometimes don’t realize that they are holding the viewfinder at a slightly different distance each time they hold it with their hands, and reducing the visual area of the composition can give you a simplified look, which is especially important when painting a quick two-hour demo such as this one,” he pointed out.

The artist had previously toned a 30"-x-30" Utrecht cotton duck canvas by rubbing burnt sienna oil paint and alkyd medium on the surface with a rag and letting it dry thoroughly over a few weeks. As other artists have also pointed out, a tone on the canvas eliminates the bright light value of a gessoed surface (which “closes” the pupil of eye), lessens the absorbency of the surface and allows smoother paint application, and enables an artist to work from the middle of the value range. At the start of the demonstration, Gyurcsak sketched the outlines of the objects with burnt sienna mixed with alkyd glazing medium and a little turpentine using a size 8 filbert bristle brush. “Delicate sketching was not needed because the scene has a dark background—the drawing could be crud-

BELOW
On the Edge
 2009, oil on linen,
 24 x 24.

BOTTOM
Pineapple Still Life
 2004, oil on panel,
 18 x 12. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Pears
 2006, oil on linen,
 26 x 26.



Gyurcsak’s Materials

Palette

- cadmium yellow medium
- cadmium red light
- yellow ochre
- burnt sienna
- ultramarine blue
- ivory black
- titanium white

Surface

- 30"-x-30" Utrecht cotton duck canvas

Brushes

- Utrecht Series 219 filbert soft bristle brushes in sizes 4 through 12
- Utrecht Series 219 flat soft bristle brushes in sizes 8 through 12
- fan brush

Mediums

- turpentine
- Utrecht alkyd glazing medium

DEMONSTRATION: STILL LIFE DEMO



Reference

The still life setup Gyurcsak arranged in approximation of N.C. Wyeth's composition for the painting *The Dusty Bottle*. The actual scene Gyurcsak painted from was much darker than this photo; he further manipulated the lighting so that a faint light at ground level hit the objects from the left, and a bit of the light from the artist's easel lamp spilled onto the objects from the right.



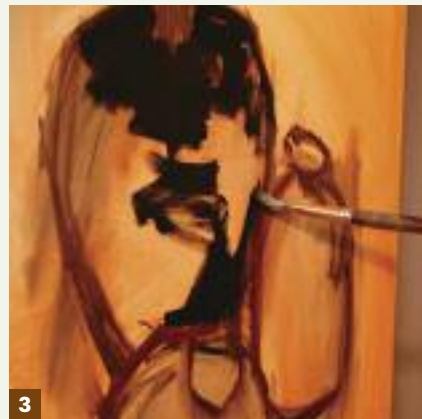
Step 1

Gyurcsak studied the scene through a homemade viewfinder that he attached to an articulated arm and alligator clip he fashioned from a lamp. By making the viewfinder stationary, the artist could ensure that his view of the composition would remain constant throughout the painting session.



Step 2

The painter had previously toned his canvas by applying burnt sienna oil paint and alkyd glazing medium to the canvas with a rag and allowing it to dry over a few weeks. Now he could sketch the outlines of the composition with a mixture of burnt sienna, alkyd glazing medium, and turpentine. "This is just to see how the shapes will fit into the space," says Gyurcsak.



Step 3

Gyurcsak next began blocking in the big shapes with an eye toward value.



Step 4

The background, which the artist constructed by placing the still life setup on black velvet that continued up behind the arrangement, was darker and cooler than the very dark green of the large glass bottle. Gyurcsak mixed this color with ivory black and ultramarine blue and scrubbed in the background around the objects.

Step 5

Next, he added the local color of the objects, taking care to preserve the areas of the canvas where he wanted highlights to show. "Don't feel the need to close every brushstroke and cover every inch of the canvas," says Gyurcsak. "Leave some of the tone of the canvas."



6



7



8

Step 6

The objects were just roughly blocked in, but Gyurcsak was already addressing highlights. "It helps to get the full value range established to avoid getting stuck in middle range," he asserts. "Put a highlight down early on—it will also help establish the form, turn the form. And it will do this quickly, which is important in a fast painting such as this alla prima demonstration." Gyurcsak added that he doesn't use up all his lightest lights so he can adjust the value range at the end of the painting process.

Step 7

The next step was to break the big shapes down into smaller ones, adding just enough detail to make the scene convincing. "When you get to the smaller areas, load the brush with paint," advises Gyurcsak. "Lay it down, and don't go over it too many times. The value, intensity, and color temperature need to be right, but don't worry too much about the accuracy of the stroke."

Step 8

Finally, the artist adjusted the colors in the white plate. "If you work from a limited palette, the nice grays that will naturally show up on your palette will work well for white objects that are picking up the colors in the scene," Gyurcsak says. "And reflections in the white will have values much darker than the local color of the objects. For example, the reflection of the orange in the plate is much darker."



THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:
Still Life Demo
2009, oil, 30 x 30.
Collection the artist.

“Don’t worry so much about making the perfect brushstroke. If the value, intensity, and temperature of the mixture are right, then it will work. Put it down fluidly, and don’t worry about the accuracy of the stroke.”



light in which to envelope the still life. Alkyd glazing medium mixed with the paints allowed Gyurcsak to work a little more quickly, as it partially set up almost immediately. The teacher always pays careful attention to the organization of his mixing palette and strongly advises students to do likewise, citing past masters who avowed that the appearance of an artist’s palette speaks eloquently of the person’s process. “An out-of-control palette equals an out-of-control painting,” Gyurcsak asserts. “Pay attention to how you manage your palette.” Another key point he made was the importance of holding a color mixture on the palette knife up to the area of the subject one wishes to paint, in the same light conditions as the subject. “Keep your easel close to your subject so you can compare them,” he says. “Don’t worry so much about making the perfect brushstroke. If the value, intensity, and temperature of the mixture are right, then it will work. Put it down fluidly, and don’t worry about the accuracy of the stroke. And don’t pet the paint on the canvas. Load the brush, lay it down, and don’t go over it too many times.”

er,” Gyurcsak comments. “This step is all about determining how the subject is going to fill up or be contained on the canvas. You have to look at the composition carefully and see how the shapes will fill the space first.”

He then turned his attention to his palette. Gyurcsak made a point of explaining the advantages of using a limited palette similar to the one suggested by many of Anders Zorn’s

paintings, including yellow ochre, cadmium red light or vermillion, cobalt blue, ivory black, and white. This color selection is sometimes slightly broadened on Gyurcsak’s palette by the inclusion of cadmium yellow medium, burnt sienna, and ultramarine blue (replacing cobalt blue). The objective is to reduce color options and create color mixtures within those options that automatically create a harmonious

Gyurcsak blocked in the big shapes with local color using size 8, 10, and 12 flat brushes, placing the strokes down as if building a mosaic, leaving some canvas showing. He concentrated on value, but nevertheless pointed out that the dark of the background was cool (made with ivory black and ultramarine blue), whereas the dark of the glass bottle was a dark green. The dark background was added next, roughly defining the shapes of the objects.

(Later in the process, he would blend the edges of these areas with a fan brush so the edges were lost and the bottle appeared to fade into the darkness.) Gyurcsak then moved on to the other objects in the still life, blocking them in with middle-range local color. “I’m doing this so I can still go up and down in value range later on these objects,” he explains. The artist was careful to not paint over the toned canvas in the areas where highlights occur on the jug, orange, and plate, pointing out that the color of the toned canvas was brighter than the adjacent areas but not as light as the lightest lights he would later add.

Switching to smaller brushes, Gyurcsak began to break down the bigger shapes into littler ones, and he quickly progressed to putting down a couple of highlights to serve as landmarks. “These few highlights help get the value range established,” he says. “It will also help establish the form, turn the form. And it will do this quickly, which is important in a fast painting such as this alla prima demonstration.” Gyurcsak utilized several tools in the artist’s toolbox to break the big shapes into smaller pieces, including details, various values, diverse brushstrokes, and contrasting color temperatures. The subject of his palette came up again. “Ask yourself questions about each color you mix,” he says. “Is the area light or dark, rich or dull, warm or cool?” The atmosphere suggested by the still life scene played a large role in its appearance, and Gyurcsak pointed out that capturing this ambience would be easier due to his limited palette. The white plate,



RIGHT
Still Life Demonstration
2008, oil, 24 x 24.

BELOW RIGHT
Three Peaches
2008, oil on panel, 8 x 16.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Bottles
2008, oil on panel, 24 x 24.



which was more dimly lit and thus much darker than the reference photo indicates, was reflecting many of the colors of its surrounding objects. The artist used the rather neutral greyns that were naturally produced on his palette to paint the local color of the plate. “Don’t be literal when you paint white objects,” Gyurcsak says. “Use some of the nice grays that show up on your mixing palette. It helps cre-

ate a unified atmosphere.” He also had some advice on painting glass—often an intimidating subject for beginners. “Just find the light source, then determine the temperature and shape of the highlight,” says the artist. “Don’t get caught up in tight descriptions of objects—paint the highlight, and let the abstract nature of glass and reflective objects do the rest. I always remember what Giorgio Morandi said,



ABOVE
Hudson en Plein Air
 2008, oil on panel,
 14 x 19. Private
 collection.

RIGHT
Vegetable Still Life
 2006, oil, 16 x 24.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT
Orchard
 2008, oil on panel,
 12 x 16. Private
 collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT
Dynasty
 2008, oil on linen,
 18 x 24.



that there is nothing more abstract than realism. That is so true. Pay attention to how one shape is interacting with other shapes. How do they fit together? Remove yourself from the everyday observation of things.”

Finally, Gyurcsak added the last highlights and blended the edges of the dark sides of objects with a fan brush, merging the color of the background with the colors of the objects in some places—even overlapping them at times. “The eye wants to fill in what is not there,” he explains. The artist discussed edges, advising students to be spare in using hard ones, utilizing soft edges much more often. “Hard edges attract your eye, so be careful where you place them.” Wyeth had scratched “three hrs” into the corner of the canvas of *The Dusty Bottle*. Gyurcsak did nothing similar, although he executed his still life in two. “Just trying to pull off something that looks like something,” he modestly said. His students seemed to think the artist had accomplished much more than merely “something.” ■

Bob Bahr is the managing editor of American Artist.

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About the Artist

Joe Gyurcsak is a painter and teacher based in Mercerville, New Jersey. He is the resident artist for Utrecht Art Supplies, providing that art-materials company with technical information from the vantage point of a working artist and conducting lectures and painting workshops throughout the United States on the company's behalf. Gyurcsak's art has been juried into numerous exhibitions, and his work has been featured in group and solo shows in dozens of galleries and museums. The artist earned a B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and attended Parsons the New School for Design, also in New York City, and the Johnson Atelier and Technical Institute of Sculpture, in Mercerville. He is represented by Frederick Galleries, in Spring Lake, New Jersey; Bucks Gallery of Fine Art, in Newtown, Pennsylvania; and Radclyffe Gallery, in New Hope, Pennsylvania. For more information, visit www.josephgyurcsak.com.