

Dialogue Maggie Price

The artist talks about how underpaintings, attention to value, and travels to new lands have contributed to her latest landscapes.

By Anne Hevener

Maggie Price isn't the type to shrink away from a challenge. After discovering an affinity for the pastel medium, she soon became frustrated by the lack of information provided for the pastel artist. Rather than waiting and hoping for change, she teamed up with artist Janie Hutchinson and created *The Pastel Journal*. That was 1998, and Price served as the magazine's editor (with Hutchinson as publisher) more than four years. "It was a tremendous learning experience for me," Price says. "Every interview with an artist was like a mini-workshop." When she realized, however, that the job was preventing her from spending as much time painting as she'd like, she sold the magazine and devoted herself to her personal artwork full-time.

It was around the same time that Price was asked to teach her first workshop. Where others might be intimidated, Price saw it as an opportunity to continue the exchange she'd begun at the magazine. "I felt that I'd been in a position to learn so much from all these talented artists I'd interviewed over the years," Price says. "But when you have to put an afternoon of conversation into a 2,000-word article, there's a lot you don't get to say. So, as *The Pastel Journal* went out of my life, workshops became my way of passing that information along." Now Price is teaching 10 to 12 workshops a year, and many of them—four in 2007—are overseas.

I decided it was time to check in with the magazine's founding editor and find out what she has learned over the last few years and how traveling and teaching have changed her perspective and her painting life.

AH: Not only have you been teaching a number of workshops, you're also still writing regularly for our magazine, and you've written a book for beginning pastel artists, *Painting With Pastels*, just out from North Light Books. Do you find that there's still time enough for your painting?

MP: I still spend more time painting than I do any one thing. I really like to be busy. And I've found that if I paint every single day, after awhile, I start to get a little cranky about it. So it's worked out really well for me. On the days when I walk into the studio and say 'I just can't do this today; I'm not in the mood,' then I work on my writing. It also works the other way. When I was working on the book, after a few days in a row of writing, I'd go to the computer in the morning and say 'No, I can't look at you today.' And so I would go to the studio and paint. Whichever way it goes, I then can go back to the other refreshed.

I also build a lot of painting time around workshops. For workshops that are away from home—and that's 95 percent of them—I build in two or three painting days before the workshop starts. This way, I can get comfortable with the kind of landscape my students will be painting. I go out and take photos and paint, and prepare for the class that way. And if it's a location I really love, I may stay for two or three days after the workshop as well. I think that this ability to paint for days in a row has profoundly changed my art—providing an opportunity to explore and work through ideas.

AH: How do you think your approach to painting has changed over the years?

Still Waters (11x17)

Price is attentive to the color of the light—and to the color temperature of the light. Observation has taught the artist that the color of light changes as you move away from noon. “It changes too,” Price notes, “with the presence of humidity or pollution in the atmosphere and with a change in latitude. Last year, I painted in Italy and then went to Scotland. The change in light from one country to the other was dramatic.”



Peaceful Highland Evening (13x19)

Price painted this landscape following a trip to Scotland last fall. Currently her favorite painting, it's the view from the front porch of her rental house on the edge of a loch. “How much is it a good painting and how much is it that I fell in love with that place?” Price asks. “I don't know. I find that I'm in love with whatever painting I'm working on. After observing a place so intensely, I'll always feel like it's mine.”

MP: It has changed in that I understand more about values. I'm also aware that I'm still scratching the surface; there's a lot more to figure out. But, whereas I used to be more intuitive and just painted what I thought I saw, now I start every painting with a consideration of the value range. I have a mental checklist that I run through: What's the lightest light? The darkest dark? What's the color of the light? What's the temperature of the light; is it warm or cool? Is it more red or more orange? More pink or more lavender? What color are the shadows? How can I use the placement of the shadows and the pattern of light to enhance the composition?

I have a ritual—whether indoors or out. Once I get my setup ready, as I'm putting on my Gloves In a Bottle barrier cream, I study my subject and run through those questions. It has become automatic. Once I've answered them, I start painting. And it seems to have improved my success rate.

AH: Are you still primarily interested in the pure landscape?

MP: I have always been drawn to the pure landscape—one that has no other elements in it. But about two years ago, that started to change. I started to become more fascinated with light and shadows on buildings. If you're going to paint in Italy, Spain and France, you're going to paint old buildings. And at the same time, as I forced myself to do it, I also started liking it. It's the same thing that attracts me—the pattern of light and shadow, thinking about how the light itself describes the side of a building, and how the pattern of shadow becomes a compositional element. It doesn't matter if it's a building or a rock.

AH: As a resident of New Mexico since 1990, will the Southwestern landscape always be your favorite to paint?

MP: The light of the Southwest caught my eye and is part of why I moved here. I love it, but I don't know if I'd still put it at the top of my list. The top of my list is getting crowded. I love the cool light of Scotland and the hot light of Greece and the way it hits those white buildings and blue domes. It seems like everywhere I go, there's something really wonderful about *that* place. In fact, my favorite place to paint is usually wherever I am or wherever I've just been. I fall in love with the spot I'm at.

AH: When you paint *en plein air*, do you know what you're going to paint before you head out?

MP: No. I'm a wanderer, especially in a new place. Sometimes people will tell me about places to go where there's great stuff to paint, but I may take five turns before I ever get to the place I've been sent. And sometimes I discover that I like what I found accidentally better anyway.

If I'm going to an area I've never been before, the goal is to paint every day—to start to get a feel for what that place is like. You feel it more profoundly by painting it than you ever can by just looking at it, I feel. So, for instance, when I knew I'd be in New Zealand after a workshop in Australia, my husband (Bill Canright) and I rented a car but made no reservations. I had no idea where we'd be. I knew we'd read the guidebook, but for the most part, we just go and see what we find.

AH: What tools do you carry with you into the field to paint?

About the Artist

Maggie Price is a pastel artist and popular workshop instructor who has been passionate about art since age 12 when she went nuts over paint-by-number sets. She didn't receive any formal training, however, until her 30s when she studied fine arts at The University of Missouri, Kansas City. It was artist Deborah Secor who introduced Price to the wonders of pastel; she has also enjoyed private study with Albert Handell, Elizabeth Mowry and Eric Michaels. She credits Michaels with inspiring her to paint outdoors, which—according to the artist—changed her art enormously. Price has painted landscapes across the country, from Alaska to San Diego, Oregon to Florida, and also around the world—in Scotland, England, Spain, Italy, Greece and Australia.

A signature member of the Pastel Society of America and the Pastel Society of New Mexico, Price currently serves on the Board of Directors of the International Association of Pastel Societies. She's a regular contributor to *The Pastel Journal* and *The Artist's Magazine*. Her new book, *Painting With Pastels*, has just been released from North Light Books (www.fwbookstore.com). She's represented by Yucca Gallery in Albuquerque, N.M.; Richeson Art Gallery in Kimberly, Wis.; and Signatures Gallery in Brookings, Ore. For more information on the artist and her workshop schedule, visit her website at www.maggiepriceart.com.



MP: I take my pastels and a Heilman pastel box, backpack size. It's 10x13 and opens up with trays on both sides. I break my pastels into pieces, and that way can fit about 200 short, stubby pieces. And that will do me for a month's worth of painting.

I take Wallis sanded paper in 9x12 pads. That's my standard, but there's a new paper by Jack Richeson & Co. that I've just tried—a sanded paper, mounted on Gatorboard—so I may take some of that with me, too, if I can get my hands on more. I bring a pad of tracing paper, so a finished painting can get stuck between its pages to carry home. And then I take a very lightweight easel and a hat.

I also take my camera; I take hundreds of photos. Sometimes I'll bring a little Cotman watercolor set and sketchbook—in case it's raining or to use in places where I can't squeeze in an easel. Then I'll do a little watercolor sketch for reference.

I keep all this packed and ready to go. If someone came into my studio and said, "Hey, let's go down to southern New Mexico where it's warmer and paint." I could be ready to go in 20 minutes. And most of that time would be finding my hat!

AH: What kind of camera do you use?

MP: One of the happiest things that happened to me lately is the invention of a good digital camera. I

use the Nikon 8700. It's an 8 megapixel camera with an 8x zoom. A digital camera is great, because for every 20 or 30 pictures you take, there may be one or two that work for a painting. But I would never try to paint a foreign location just from my photos; my color studies and sketches are really important. That's where I find out how my pictures lie to me. I can look at them and know that a certain element wasn't really that light, or that dark, but the photo jogs my memory and gives me a good reference of shape and detail.

AH: Can you walk us through the stages of a studio painting? How do you start?

MP: The first step is the selection of a subject. Once I find it, then next is determining what portion of it to use. Where is the focal point going to land? Do I need to combine two or three photos to get what I want? Because I use digital images, I use the computer, doing most of the preliminary manipulation of the photo in PhotoShop. So, if I have to combine photos, for instance, I actually combine them (in PhotoShop) to see what it looks like. I don't mess much with color in PhotoShop, because I can change that on the painting. I just work out the composition mostly—the placement of the focal point, in particular. When we take photos, we tend

“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” —Marcel Proust (French author, 1871 - 1922)



Shadow Play
(11x17)



to put the focal point in the center, and I don't want the focal point dead center in a painting. So, I'll crop a photo, then enlarge it, and print it out on photo paper.

For the painting stage, more often than not, I start with an underpainting, and I have a few favorite methods (see three outlined in "My Favorite Underpainting Techniques" on page 52). The value of the underpainting is that, when it's done, I can analyze it and ask: Is this a good abstract composition? Does it have a good balance of light and dark? Warm and cool? An interesting and pleasing grouping of shapes? If the underpainting is very strong, the painting almost always comes out great. In classes, sometimes the students will see the underpainting and tell me to stop, but I know if the underpainting is working, I can make a dynamite painting.

Conversely, if the underpainting isn't working, I can immediately stop and correct it. I can adjust values to correct a 50/50 balance of lights and darks, for instance, or move a focal point that landed smack dab in the center of the composition, even though I told it not to. If I see drawing errors or placement errors, I can grab a hard pastel and fix them before I move on.

So the underpainting is my first check. And, if I have kept a light touch with my first application of pastel and Turpenoid, at this point I haven't touched the tooth of my surface (white Wallis sanded paper), so I can still make a lot of changes.

AH: And once the underpainting is established?

MP: If I'm impatient, which I almost always am, I'll dry the underpainting with a hair dryer, and then continue the painting. If there's a lot of sky



in the painting, I often start by putting the sky color in; I like to get its value and temperature established right away since it can affect the entire painting. Then I move to the darkest darks, working most often from dark to light, and from big shapes to small shapes. When the surface of the painting is fairly well covered with pastel and fairly well defined, I zero in on the focal point, and then define it.

Then I wash my hands and step away from the picture and ask: Is it done? Do I really need any more? Because I know if I over-detail the areas surrounding the focal point, the focal point will no longer speak as the focal point. Then, to keep myself from overworking, I try to spend 10 minutes

**Rooftops,
Alpendiere, Spain
(top; 11x17)**

**At Donatella's Villa
(11x17)**

My Favorite Underpainting Techniques By Maggie Price



I used exaggerated color to create this underpainting for *Shadow Play* (page 50). This shows the underpainting after I applied the brilliant colors and brushed on the Turpenoid.



I used a monochromatic technique to do the underpainting for the painting *At Donatella's Villa* (page 51). The light in the scene was a cool lavender, so I did the underpainting in five values of lavender (step 1). I then washed the pastel with Turpenoid (step 2), before continuing with the painting.

I love doing underpaintings. They're free. They're loose. They're expressive. And, because it's just an underpainting, you can try anything and know if it doesn't work, you can fix it in the next stage. It's very freeing.

I do an underpainting in pastel and then wash it with odorless Turpenoid using a broad brush. I grab whatever brush is handy—typically a No. 8 or 6 flat or a No. 6 filbert. But it doesn't really matter what brush size as long as you avoid using a tiny brush so you don't nitpick over too many tiny shapes. I dip the brush in the Turpenoid, and then dab it on a paper towel so it's not too drippy and then carefully paint an area. I start with the light areas first and work toward the dark, so my Turpenoid doesn't get too muddy. I make a couple of strokes, wipe the brush, dip it in Turpenoid and continue. This keeps the underpainting clean, so that when it's done, there are distinct, un-muddied areas of color.

There are several underpainting techniques that I use; these are a few of my favorites:

Brilliant Color • With this technique, I exaggerate every color to a brilliant color. If I have a dusty beige path, for example, I underpaint it in shocking orange or pink. If there's a hint of lavender, I underpaint that area in brilliant purple. I do it in big shapes so that at the end of the underpainting, I have maybe 10 or 12 big shapes of color—outrageous, exciting color. Next, I brush with Turpenoid, dry it, and then start working toward more realistic color. Where I can do it without being garish, I leave flecks of the underpainting showing through. See the underpainting for *Shadow Play* above, and the finished painting on page 50.

Monochromatic Underpainting • This approach is essentially a value study—a simplification of shapes so that your underpainting is just a few large shapes. I use this underpainting technique when I want to block in with the scene's dominant color, the complement of the dominant color, or in the color of the light. See the underpainting for *At Donatella's Villa* as it develops in the two illustrations at left. See the finished painting on page 51.

Complementary Color • I use this underpainting technique most often when my subject is mostly green. If you have a lot of green and you just start painting it as green, it can be dead boring. But if you underpaint it in red and magenta, and let flecks of these colors show through the green, then the painting just sings.

Underpainting of Sunlight and Shadow • In this approach, all areas of sunlight are underpainted in shades of yellow and all areas of shadow in shades of blue. It requires a lot of analysis, forcing you to study a photograph and see what it is you're looking at, rather than assuming you know. It's that "assuming we know" that gets us into so much trouble.

studying for every new mark I make. Even then, I sometimes think I could've stopped sooner.

AH: Would you say that knowing when to stop is your biggest challenge?

MP: Yes, and I have a whole list of games I play with myself to keep from overworking. If I think I'm getting close to a finish, for instance, I often take the painting off the easel and take it in my living room and set it on the fireplace mantel where I can't reach a pastel. I go in the other room or leave the house, and then when I walk back in the room, I can see it with fresh eyes and try to see what's wrong. I may take it down and fix one thing, and then put it back up on the mantel. It's important to be cautious, because once you lose that freshness, you can't get it back.

AH: Do you think that teaching workshops has made you a better painter?

MP: Teaching makes me think about why I do what I do; it makes me simplify my process. In doing that, I think it has spilled over into the work I do in the studio and in the field. I automatically think more about what I'm doing and can catch myself if I'm about to overcomplicate it. I'm more likely to stop and say to myself: 'Look, you only have one subject here, one focal point. If you put this other interesting element in over here, an inch away from the edge, it's going to draw the viewer's eye away from the focal point.' Ten years ago, I would've just gone ahead and painted it, thinking it's an interesting thing and I like it. I have learned that sometimes you have to sacrifice an element you like for the sake of the whole.

AH: This year, you'll be teaching workshops in Italy, Scotland and Spain. How does being in a foreign environment change the nature of the painting experience?


MP: It makes me a better observer. When I go to a place I've never been before, I don't think I know what's there. Around here, I get too comfortable. I think I can paint a juniper bush in my sleep. I think I know what they look like. But when I go somewhere else, I haven't a clue what those things are. I don't know their color or their shape, and it forces me to really look at them. By doing that, and by being careful to observe what's really there, I get out of my comfort zone. And I think my paintings are better for that.



Waiting (11x14)

Long attracted to the pure landscape, Price thinks there might be a change in the works. She recently did this painting from a photograph she took in Greece. "Every now and then I would run through my file of photos that says 'paint me' and there would be this old woman. Finally, I just picked up the pastels and did it. Now I'm wondering about other photos: Where is that one of the guy with the donkey? And those kids at the fiesta?"

What's odd is that after I've been away for awhile, and I've really been concentrating on another landscape, when I come back here, it looks foreign to me. So I observe this landscape better after I've been gone. When I travel, I get new eyes. Then I come home and I look at what's here with new eyes.

Once you begin seeing with the eye of an artist, you never see the world the same way again. Sometimes I think about how there are people that really don't see the world around them. They miss all these things. And other times I think I'm just crazy and obsessed, and why would they want to see everything I see? But it's been true for me—that you never know the land so well as when you paint it. 

Anne Hevener is the editor of *The Pastel Journal* and one of the featured speakers at this year's International Association of Pastel Societies convention in Albuquerque.