

Lessons



in Pastel

In her workshops, New Mexico pastel artist **Maggie Price** presents her technique—emphasizing observation and interpretation—as just one approach of many.

by **Lynne Moss Perricelli**

AS A WORKSHOP INSTRUCTOR, juror, and writer of numerous instructional pastel articles—not to mention a pastel artist herself—Maggie Price has collected a wealth of useful information on her chosen medium. She says she is still learning, however, and that “there’s always a new challenge, a new subject, a greater understanding of seeing and interpreting the subject.” Sharing what’s she learned is an essential part of her artistic life, but she doesn’t want students to paint like she does. “In a workshop, the information should be such that each can use it for individual growth.” (Price will offer workshops at *American Artist’s Art Methods & Materials Show*, in Pasadena, California, October 5 through 9.)

In her workshops, Price emphasizes the same principles she does in creating her own artwork: observation and interpretation of the landscape. Although she prefers working en plein air, when doing so is not possible she turns to photos and on-site color studies as refer-

ences in her studio. She is particular about her photos, though: “I always keep in mind the inaccuracies of photography, and I paint only from my own photos of places I’ve been. I observe as much as possible when I’m at the location, and then back in my studio I try to recall what the photos don’t show me. I don’t want to just copy a photograph—I want a painting that has the life and energy of the real place and time.”

One of the keys to Price’s success as an artist is her understanding of her materials. Generally, in the studio she works on white, museum-grade Wallis Sanded Pastel Paper, a surface she favors for its ability to withstand wet underpaintings, mixing wet and dry techniques, and numerous layers of pastel. Occasionally she uses Ampersand Pastelbord or makes her own pumice/gesso surface. She has hundreds of pastels that she organizes by color and value in a large Craftsman tool chest.

Although partial to Unison, Pastels Girault, and Terry



Grand Finale
2004, pastel, 8 x 11.
Private collection.

DEMONSTRATION: BEAR CREEK



Step 1

Working on white Wallis Sanded Pastel Paper, Price made a preliminary drawing with extra-soft vine charcoal. To keep the drawing loose, she used a long stick and held it from the end. The goal at this stage was to indicate the placement of the major lines and forms.



Step 2

Next, the artist began blocking in large shapes of color with soft pastels that she held on their side. In this piece, Price was interested in the colors she could see through the water. She applied some of those colors in this underlayer.



Step 3

Price then washed over the major colors with Turpenoid applied with an old synthetic brush. She worked carefully, washing the color in the lightest values, cleaning her brush frequently on a paper towel, and moving to the darker values.



Step 4

The artist re-established some of the drawing lost in the Turpenoid stage. She quickly redrew the rock shapes so that she wouldn't lose their unique formations, then began working in the shadowed area of water at the right edge of the painting.



Step 5

Layering very soft pastels by holding them on their side and scumbling lightly, Price allowed the Turpenoid layer and underlayers to show through. Where ripples needed definition, she used a Girault pastel to push the soft pastel layers into the paper while adding color.

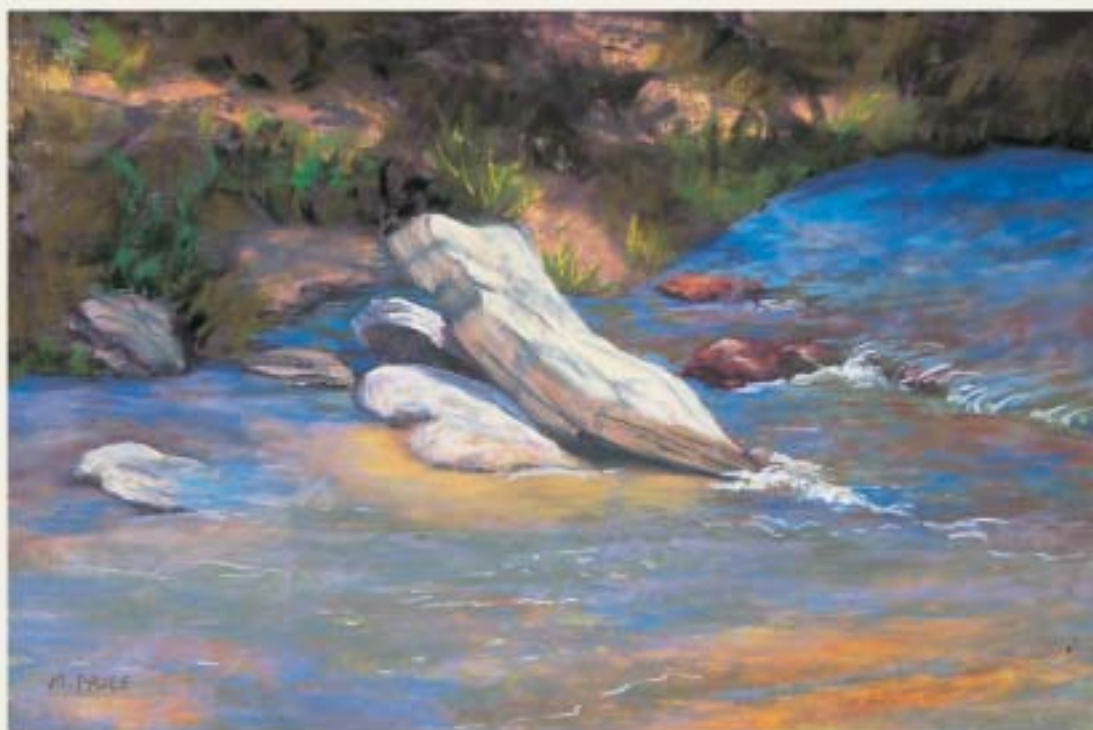


Step 6

Price began defining the larger rock, paying attention to the shadows that crossed it. Additional layers of color gave depth and luminosity to the water. She then defined the second-largest rock and the shadow across it, and worked more color into the piece.

Finishing Touches

Finishing touches included ripples in the water, the last rocks on the bank, and careful consideration of any additional details to the greenery on the bank. Because the bank is not the focal point, Price was careful not to make that area too detailed.



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
Bear Creek
2005, pastel, 11 x 17.
Collection Sandra Crum.



“The initial block-in is crucial because it establishes the abstract pattern of value and temperature relationships. If that’s not right, it must be repaired immediately or the whole painting can go wrong.”

Narooma (New South Wales)
2005, pastel, 8 x 10.
Collection the artist.
Price completed this painting en plein air.

Ludwig brands, she also employs Great American Artworks, Schmincke, Senelier, Mount Vision, and Faber-Castell Polychromos pastels. Experimenting with all the pastel materials she can has no doubt expanded her range of techniques and knowledge about the supplies that work best for the effects she desires. “I think every brand has some range of colors or particular quality that is unique,” she states. She chooses pastel sticks for color and consistency, and she says she would hate to do without any of them.

Landscape is Price’s primary subject. “There is so much beauty in the natural landscape,” she says, “and the process of interpreting that—emphasizing what I see that attracts me and designing the painting so that others may enjoy those beautiful places—is an endless challenge.” When scanning a scene for a

subject, she first looks for an interesting pattern of light and shadow. She then searches for a design of shapes that holds her attention. Last, she evaluates the color, keeping in mind that if the local color is not compelling, she can exaggerate it. “I love the grand vistas and panoramas,” the artist adds, “but I try to remember to focus more closely on the particular subject that caught my eye.”

Back in the studio, Price assesses her color studies and photo references from the site, and begins a new work directly on the painting surface. She does not make preliminary drawings because she tends to spend too much time on them and, in the process, loses enthusiasm for the painting. To make the drawing on the painting surface, she uses extra-soft vine charcoal. A kneaded eraser is all she needs to make any changes. She keeps the preliminary drawing very

simple: just a few lines to establish major positions and the focal point.

Next, Price makes an underpainting with pastel, blocking in large, simple shapes with the side of soft pastels, applied lightly. “This is another reason for not doing a complex preliminary sketch, because the block-in of simple shapes would obliterate it,” Price explains. Once she is satisfied with the balance of shapes and has set up an effective abstract pattern of lights and darks and warms and cools, Price brushes over the underpainting with Turpenoid and waits for the surface to dry. She can then redraw certain compositional elements if necessary, usually using a Girault pastel in a color that will show up well. “That drawing will likely be covered as the work progresses,” the artist says. “It’s simply a reminder to me of the shapes and placement of objects.”



"In a workshop, the information should be such that each can use it for individual growth."

In the next phase Price blocks in most of the large shapes in local color before turning her attention to details. Her underpaintings typically exhibit stronger color than the local color, which allows her to let some of the underpainting show through the layers on top. She develops the colors and forms from dark to light, generally working from top to bottom. Price tends to develop a painting from the most distant portion of the landscape forward. "Doing this helps me keep distant objects simple and softer in color, and as I work forward in space I can use stronger colors and more detail," she explains.

After she has blocked in accurate color over the whole painting, Price

concentrates on the focal area, bringing it to about 80 percent completion before analyzing her progress and determining her next step.

The artist cites two different phases as the most critical in her painting process: blocking-in and finishing. "The initial block-in is crucial because it establishes the abstract pattern of value and temperature relationships," she says. "If that's not right, it must be repaired immediately or the whole painting can go wrong." In fact, Price checks twice that the block-in is accurate and satisfactory: once after she has completed it and again after she washes over it with Turpenoid. Knowing when to finish a painting is equally important,

ABOVE

Sunrise

2004, pastel, 11 x 15.
Courtesy Richeson Art
Gallery, Kimberly,
Wisconsin.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Standing Stones
(Drombeg, Ireland)**

2004, pastel on board,
7 x 10. Collection the
artist.

however. "It's so easy to overwork and ruin a good painting," she remarks. "I try to stop when I think I'm not quite finished and set the painting out of reach to study it. One method I use is to put the painting in a different part of the house, out of the studio, in a place where I'll walk by and see it unexpectedly." Evaluating the painting with a critical eye, she corrects only egregious flaws. "In those final stages, every stroke requires some consideration. I have to analyze whether a change will improve the painting. If it won't make a significant difference, it's best not to do it."

To develop convincing form and color, Price relies on layering the pastel strokes with little blending. Like most



pastelists, she often works from hard to soft. At other times she lays down a soft pastel and uses a firmer one to push it into the paper. She holds the soft pastels, such as Terry Ludwig or Unison, on their side and uses a light touch to scumble a layer of color over another. When she must blend, she uses a pastel rather than using her fingers, which may remove or flatten color. "However, I may find instances where any of these rules need to be broken," the artist adds. "I tell my students that it's important to understand the rules, such as working dark to light and hard to soft, and to follow them in the beginning, but as an artist matures in his or her understanding of the subject and medium, the rules are sometimes not applicable and can, and should, be broken."

In her workshops Price also emphasizes that each artist is at a different stage of growth, "and that doesn't mean

that one is 'better' than another, just at a different point," she says. "I encourage students to compare their work only with their own previous work. If they are continuing to grow, then the work is good. It's great to look at other artists and be inspired by their work

and to have goals for what you want to achieve, but each artist grows and learns at his or her own speed, and it's important to respect that." ■

Lynne Moss Perricelli is the editor of American Artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Maggie Price is a signature member of Plein Air New Mexico, the Pastel Society of New Mexico, and Associated Pastelists on the Web, and she is also an associate member of the Pastel Society of America. In addition to jurying shows and teaching workshops, she is a co-founder of *The Pastel Journal* and now contributes regularly to that magazine, as well as to *The Artist's Magazine* and *Artist's Sketchbook*. She has participated in numerous juried shows, winning many awards. Price is represented by Yucca Art Gallery, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Richeson Art Gallery, in Kimberly, Wisconsin. To learn more about the artist, visit her website: www.maggiepriceart.com. To register for her workshop at the Art Methods & Materials Show, in Pasadena, California, visit www.artmethods.com, or call (888) 999-3973.