

JAYE SCHLESINGER

Directing her attention not to flowers and fruits but to industrial objects and tools, this artist reimagines the still life.

By Michael Chesley Johnson

Ann Arbor, Michigan, artist Jaye Schlesinger found that her career in medical illustration, combined with her interest in anatomy, made a natural lead-in to portraiture. Indeed, the very first pastel portrait she created, *Emily at 15*, won an honorable mention in *The Pastel Journal's* 4th Annual Pastel 100, a recognition that gave her the confidence to take on 30 commissioned portraits in both pastel and charcoal. Another boost in confidence came after winning a cash award in 1998 at the Washington Society of Portrait Artists International Competition and having her work exhibited in the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Her definition of what constitutes a portrait began to change a few years ago, however. Looking at common tools as subjects, she started to create what she calls "object portraits." "I began to look at objects like tools out of their normal contexts," she explains. "I found a lot of excitement in the process of intense observation. While I was painting, these inanimate objects took on other meanings—symbolic, metaphorical, sometimes provocative, sometimes personal. These pictures have a presence that invites the viewer to come closer."

From her training as a cabinetmaker comes her interest in tools. "I find them interesting, even soulful, sometimes for their beautiful form, other times for their whimsical characteristics, and other times because they seem to

look human or animal-like." She also likes objects that have reflective surfaces, such as glass or porcelain, and ones with graceful shapes. Often, she'll work on a series of objects that are related, as in *Pitcher Quartet* (below).

Drawing Lies at the Heart

Schlesinger, who was born in Chicago, took some art classes in junior high and high school, but learned mostly on her

own. She spent hours making detailed drawings of whatever was at hand; she also copied the works of other artists, especially Picasso. In spite of this early interest, she attended the School of Art at Washington University (St. Louis) for only one semester, and ended up instead with a degree in psychology.

The fact that she continued to paint on her own during college told her that the world of art was where she really

Pica Place (at left, 17x14), *Pitcher Quartet* (below, 12x15)



wanted to be, so she went on to get a master of fine arts degree in painting from the University of Michigan. Schlesinger used the two years of independent study to find a direction. "I had two disparate styles of work: large abstract paintings that consisted of veiled layers of thin acrylic paint and detailed pencil drawings of everyday objects. It became clear to me that I was more of a drawer than a painter."

The Craft of Woodworking

After graduate school, she continued to draw. When she sought to interest galleries in her work, she became disillusioned with the process of marketing herself and decided to pursue cabinet-making. As an apprentice at a local custom hardwood furniture shop, she fell in love with woodworking. To this day, she continues her woodworking as a hobby.

Standing Clamp (17x12)



In fact, she's built much of the furniture in her home.

While rearing two daughters, she began to draw yet again and to exhibit, both locally and nationally; she also got involved with local art groups. As a way of using her love of drawing to make a living, she soon thereafter began studying for a second post-graduate degree in medical illustration from the University of Michigan. "The training was rigorous. We had to gain an intense knowledge of anatomy, physiology, surgery and pathology, as well as to learn many traditional techniques involving carbon dust, pen-and-ink, airbrush, gouache, colored pencil and watercolor." She worked successfully in the business for 12 years—illustrating a dozen medical textbooks and co-illustrating more than 50 book chapters and journal articles. She also taught medical illustration, but then the computer revolution occurred, and she found herself dealing more with technology than with the physical, more satisfying act of drawing. Recently she left the field to pursue her art full time.

Standing Clamp (at left), the first non-portrait pastel painting she did, was a breakthrough. "It was so liberating not to be confined to the features of the face and the difficulty of capturing a likeness," she says. The clamp interested her for its form rather than its function, an idea that opened her up to exploring other common objects and making them the focus of her "object portraits." "I also experienced the wonderful spontaneity that pastels allow. I began to love the physical process of putting pastel onto sanded paper."

Composition Choices

Schlesinger begins by taking many photographs of her chosen objects. "Selecting, along with arranging and lighting the objects, takes more time than it might appear, given my seemingly simple compositions," she says. The location of shadows she finds particularly important, so she often shoots a series of photos of the same objects but with different sources of light. Finding the right vantage from which to view the object matters, too, as it has a major influence

on mood. "I'm often bothered by horizontal lines or table edges, so I sometimes play them down or eliminate them altogether. I still have to deal with the area where the object sits against or meets the background, and I do this by using gradations of color and value to minimize the edge."

Often, she'll use the computer to cut and paste from different photo references. Then she'll use the scaling tool in Adobe Photoshop to extend the image in one dimension, if she wants the final work to be of a specific proportion. (Photoshop offers her another option: If a painting isn't working well, she'll scan it and try different solutions, like changing colors or increasing the contrast.)

Another preliminary task is creating a thumbnail sketch in charcoal or graphite to help her visualize how the work will appear. "Sometimes the sketches are quick and rough, but I clearly indicate the major areas of lights and darks. This sketch serves as a road map so that I'm always thinking about value in addition to hue."

Precision With Pencil

Once she's got the right photo and a thumbnail sketch that suits her, she lays out a sheet of Belgian Grey Mist Wallis sanded paper on her old oak library table, which sits in a large, second-floor bedroom. She doesn't mount the paper, because it's firm enough not to crease or buckle. Periodically she holds the paper up and taps the back of it to dislodge loose dust that falls into a homemade, cardboard tray.

Under light from a combination of west-facing windows and supplemental spotlights, she begins with pastel pencils, working flat on the table. She uses pencils almost to the exclusion of other forms of pastel, and likes a number of brands: CarbOthello, Conté, Cretacolor, Derwent, Faber-Castell and Van Gogh. "I love using the Derwents for the backgrounds because they have a creamy consistency that can be blended easily for a smooth look," she says. She also likes the Derwents for the variety of subtle pinks, browns and greens they offer. She uses pastel sticks only if she needs to



Orbital Sander (10½x8)

cover a large area. "Since most of my work is under 16x20, I've found that I have more control with pastel pencils."

The Figure and the Ground

Working on both background and foreground simultaneously so that the background and subject matter become integrated, she starts by blocking in large sections with the overall color of each area. Next, she puts in the darkest darks and lightest lights, establishing extremes which will help her gauge the middle values later. She builds up each area with lightly applied layers of a

different color, which she blends with her finger or with a kneaded eraser. If she fills up the paper's tooth, she sprays a light coat of Latour fixative to freshen the tooth, and then goes back to lighten the areas the fixative has darkened. As she works, she employs a limited palette to ensure the unity of the overall composition. She's drawn to toned-down colors and subtle nuance. "I've found that buyers usually are attracted to bright colors. This is somewhat of a dilemma," she laments, "so I'm trying to be more experimental with all kinds of colors."



Bench Vice (9x14)

Rendering Details

The major portion of her work consists of detailed rendering. Sometimes she starts with the center of interest, which is often the most complicated part. "Getting that area resolved lets me be a little freer with the other areas. Other times," she says, "I like to save the best for last. If there's a particular part that seems as if it'll be fun to do, I like to savor the anticipation and do some of the more mundane areas first."

All that detail requires sharp pencils, but pastel pencils are notorious for being difficult to sharpen. "One of the biggest frustrations is finding a good pencil sharpener that works without causing the pastel to break or crumble," she says. She's tried all kinds, including some very expensive electric ones, but the one that seems to work best is a Boston Model 24 that she got at a garage sale for 10 cents. Alternately, she shaves down the tip with a scalpel

blade and uses sandpaper to bring the tip to a sharp point.

Although many of her paintings evince a high degree of realism, Schlesinger likes to suggest detail rather than state it exactly. If a piece is particularly complicated, she may practice on a separate sheet of paper until she gets the effect she wants; she then takes that



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learned skill to a new sheet of paper. In *Pica Place* (see page 42), she suggested the edge grain of plywood by making a stencil to get a consistent width of grain, and then used just a few strokes of two different colors. Sometimes she finds a more spontaneous or looser application gives her the right effect. "I can almost feel something lock into place when my pencil does the right thing and captures a specific characteristic. It feels like magic." She also likes to float her pencil lightly over the surface to introduce a subtle color or texture.

Self-reliance is a Virtue

Once the painting is complete, which can take a full week of six to eight-hour days, she scans it on her Epson 636. "It's a little scary, placing a pastel painting face down on the glass, but I'm willing to take this risk because the results are so good." If the painting is larger than the bed of the scanner, she scans the work in

How to Avoid an Overworked Look

1. Practice a new stroke or approach on a draft sheet of paper before applying it to your final piece.
2. Rather than erase one spot repeatedly, try applying a layer of Art Spectrum pastel primer to freshen the ground.
3. "Float" color over an area subtly to introduce a new color or texture.
4. If you run into a problem, scan the painting and try different solutions on the computer. (Be sure to tap the back before you lay your paper on the glass.)
5. Use a limited palette to unify the composition automatically.

sections and then "pastes" them together in Photoshop. Next, she adjusts color balance, color and saturation until the image matches the original. She saves the image in three sizes: one for 8½x11 inkjet prints, one for 35 mm slides and a third for her Web site. She makes her prints on Epson Enhanced Matte Paper or glossy photo paper using an Epson Stylus Photo 2200 inkjet printer. Slides are made by a local photographic imaging company, using the digital files she burns to a CD.

If she needs to ship a piece, she does her own boxing and crating. "I learned professional crate-making when working at the University of Michigan Museum of Art as a preparator," she says. "I even spent four days learning from a 'master' crater at the Art Institute of Chicago." For most of her shipping, she uses a combination of bubblewrap, corrugated cardboard, Fome-Cor, Gatorboard and Styrofoam insulation.

The Long and Winding Road

When Schlesinger thinks back on her career, she realizes that none of her time was wasted. "I was trained as a medical illustrator. Studying medical illustration is how I learned to think about light on form. Since I often didn't have the luxury of seeing what I needed to draw, I had to understand the principles of how light defines form in order to convincingly depict a subject. This understanding is of critical importance to my current work, so that the overall form is not sacrificed for the details."

Today she takes on an occasional medical illustration project, but continues to paint, choosing objects that speak to her and reflect her life and surroundings. "Last year, I taught a drawing class at a local center which has workshops in

all aspects of book arts. I was attracted to the many antique book presses and other typesetting tools that filled the space. This unique place is providing me with the subject matter for my current series of paintings." (See *Book Press #1* below.) Thinking back on her career,

Schlesinger says she came to embrace pastels circuitously and without preconceptions about what she should or shouldn't do. "As I experimented, I realized that there are, in fact, useful technical conventions. Still, I'm a proponent of some degree of self-learning as a way of developing a unique style."

■ *Jaye Schlesinger has exhibited in more than 70 national and local venues, including the Art Institute of Chicago. She won two prestigious awards in the Pastel Society of America's 31st Annual Open Exhibition and placed third in still life in the 6th Annual Pastel 100. She's represented by River Gallery in Chelsea, Michigan. Visit www.jayeschlesinger.com.*

Book Press #1 (15x13)





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