

CREATING AN ORIGINAL still life painting is a daunting task. The genre has been a favorite with artists for centuries and, as a result, museums and galleries are filled with paintings of flowers, fruits and other by-now overly familiar objects. Sadie J. Valeri's response to this is to combine traditional subject matter—pitchers, shells, bottles—with a contemporary material not normally associated with fine art: wax paper. “I was drawn to the material because I could twist and crush the transparent paper to create dynamic environments for the antique bottles and pitchers I collect,” she says. Valeri has produced a series of works featuring wax paper, for which she's received impressive critical acclaim. Her painting *Bottle Collection* (at right) won first prize in the still life category at the 2009–2010 Art Renewal Center International Salon. For Valeri, success has been the result of diligent study combined with a creative approach to classic methods.

Becoming an Artist

Now based in San Francisco, where she runs the Sadie Valeri Atelier, the artist grew up outside of Boston. She remembers drawing obsessively as child and hearing the often-asked question of her classmates at school (spoken,

Sadie J. Valeri energizes the traditional still life by including an untraditional element in her compositions: wax paper.



twist on the Classics

BY MICHAEL LACOY



as Valeri tells it, in their thick New England accents): “Ahh you going to be an ahh-tist when you grow up?” With the encouragement of her high school art teacher and the support of her family, Valeri went on to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where she majored in illustration.

Valeri excelled at RISD but felt unsure about her prospects upon graduation. “What stymied me most as a young artist leaving art school was the question of what to paint. The possibilities are endless in the postmodern

ABOVE: “*Bottle Collection* (oil, 18x24) is the most elaborate and challenging arrangement I’ve painted to date,” says Valeri. “The preparatory drawing itself took me a couple weeks, but it turned out to be invaluable as the wax paper sagged significantly over the course of my painting. By the end, everything was strung up with thread taped to the studio ceiling and propped up with thin wire taped to the shelf.”



web EXTRA

For Valeri's tips on painting high-lights, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

era and, frankly, I was overwhelmed by the thought that my choice of subject had to be particularly clever to be noticed." For the next 10 years, Valeri worked as a graphic and Web designer and made no art of her own except for work done in life-drawing groups.

But Valeri's discovery of the contemporary classical realist movement inspired her to dust off her paints and brushes. She took workshops with a number of the biggest names in the field, including Ted Seth Jacobs, Michael Grimaldi, Juliette Aristides, and Tim Stotz and Nicole Michelle Tully of Studio Escalier in France. She also learned the basics of traditional Flemish layered painting technique from Kirstine Reiner. "After an intense period of taking workshops for a couple years and constantly practicing what I was learning, I felt the urge to create something more than a study, something of my own," says Valeri. Working out of her home, where space was limited, Valeri decided to focus on still lifes. "I just arranged things I found visually compelling. I didn't think about whether anyone else would like them." From these beginnings the Wax Paper Series was born.

Objective: Capture Light and Form

Valeri's approach to painting is straightforward. "I paint realistic light effects supported by a structural analysis of form," she says. Combining an impressionist's sensitivity to color with an engineer's grasp of function allows her to "unlock the beauty of the objects" she paints. The artist does her visual analysis through drawing—her favorite part of the painting process—which allows her to "study every form, reverse-engineer all the shapes and analyze the behavior of the light." She adds, "I like to understand why the curved, graceful handle of a cup or pitcher looks firm enough to grasp for pouring and never looks soft or floppy." This close observation is the key to her paintings' convincing realism.

Meticulous Setup and Drawing

Setting up is the important first step in Valeri's still life painting process. "Since I'll be spending a month or more staring at the subject, I like to be sure that I love it before I begin," she says. The setup can take days as she carefully arranges and rearranges the various objects into a harmonious, visually pleasing composition.

LEFT: "Silver Globe Pitcher" (oil, 16x20) is a rare instance in which I included a self-portrait in my painting" says Valeri. "The viewer can see my entire little studio and get a glimpse into the experience of the painter."

BELOW: *Winged Victory I* (charcoal and chalk, 24x18) caption text to come caption text to come caption text to come caption text to .



She's drawn to challenging and eye-engaging surfaces, "from the opalescent interior of a seashell to translucent papers twisted into crushed spirals."

Once satisfied with her setup, Valeri spends a few days working on a detailed contour drawing. "I've found," she says, "that the more care I take with the drawing, the more time I save in later stages of the painting." Working on frosted Mylar (a high-quality tracing paper), Valeri doesn't worry about shading her drawing, concentrating instead on composition, proportion and structure.

She transfers the completed drawing onto a primed wood panel but then refines the lines, reducing their width with a pen-style (retractable) eraser. In this way, she eliminates what she describes as the "dead, traced quality" of the lines. Finally, Valeri seals the drawing onto the panel with a coat of damar varnish thinned with odorless mineral spirits. "This protects the drawing," she says, "and also creates an ideal painting surface: not too thirsty, not too slick." (See *Precise Line, Value and Color*, steps 1–5; pages ••–••.)



Open and Closed Grisaille

With her drawing resolved and her support fully prepared, Valeri is ready to start painting. She works under natural north light and begins with two grisaille underpaintings. Using only burnt umber, the artist lays in the basic values of her composition, leaving bare the white areas of the panel for the light areas of the painting; this process is called "open grisaille." The next step—the "closed grisaille"—involves creating a string of six or seven values, from black to white, mixed from burnt umber, ultramarine blue and a small amount of flake white. Using these mixtures, Valeri paints a full-value rendering of her subject. "I often bring this monochromatic version of the painting to a high finish with two or

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ABOVE: "Capturing the shapes of the highlights precisely," says Valeri, "is the key to making glass objects, such as the bottle in *Message in a Bottle* (oil, 10x8), feel solid and symmetrical."

Precise Line, Value and Color

BY SADIE J. VALERI

A good drawing is crucial to a good painting. Once I've established my setup, I trace the size and shape of my painting panel on a sheet of white paper and overlay a sheet of Mylar drafting film over the rectangular shape. With translucent Mylar I can move the drawing around over the panel guidelines in order to refine my composition before transferring it to the actual panel.

1. I start my drawing with a **straight-line block-in** or envelope that encompasses all the objects in my composition as one shape. Then I add a few lines to segment the shape into the individual elements of the composition.

2. I **segment the lines** more and add detail to see whether the shapes continue to feel accurate. If I feel that I'm squeezing or stretching anything to fit it into the space I've built for it, I go back to earlier stages. Problems in one small area usually mean there's a larger error in proportions. I rely on my eyes and rarely take measurements.

3. Crumpled papers can seem like a jumble of shapes. I look for **major pathways of structure** passing through and across the form, like stress paths an engineer might diagram on a bridge design. The paper holds its form due to the structural integrity of the shape. It's up to the artist to reverse-engineer it. Once I find the pathways, I continue to look for smaller forms. All through this process, I use only straight lines.

4. Once the shapes are blocked in accurately with straight lines, I begin **thinking constructively**, trying to understand the three-dimensional structure of the solid objects. The shell felt flattened, so I constructed it with interlocking ovals, noting where shapes disappeared into the form and re-emerged.

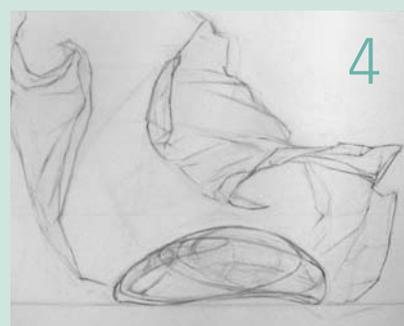
5. When all drawing and composition issues are resolved, I transfer my drawing to a gessoed wood panel. I then **shave the widths of each line of the transferred drawing** with a retractable eraser until I have hair-thin contours. I lighten the lines by rolling over them with a kneaded eraser. After brushing away dust and eraser debris, I seal the surface with one coat of varnish and odorless mineral spirits (1:5 ratio).

6. My first underpainting is an **open grisaille**, which uses the white of the panel for light areas, so some of the canvas is left exposed or open. The only paint color I use is burnt umber. For light areas, I thin the paint with odorless mineral spirits. The open grisaille takes me a day or two to complete.

7. Next comes a **closed grisaille**, an underpainting rendered in a full value range and covering the entire surface of the panel. Using burnt umber, ultramarine blue and flake white, I mix six or seven puddles of neutral, warm gray, ranging from black to white, in a string on my palette. I spend about a week bringing this monochromatic painting to a full finish with two or more layers, using small brushes.

8. Next, I go over the entire painting with a general pass of **opaque color**, matching the values of the underpainting while completely covering it. I evaluate each area for hue, value and chroma. I stick with my main contours, but I don't worry much about details at this stage.

9. I work on one small area of the painting per day, letting it dry while I work on other areas on other days. Doing one pass over the entire surface can take a week. Dry paint creates a surface that doesn't accept wet paint easily, so at the beginning of each painting session I paint what's called a **couch**, a thin layer



of medium over the surface. If the couch beads up or pulls away from the surface, I lightly abrade the surface with very fine (600- to 1500-grit) wet/dry sandpaper, leaving a thin film of oil paint.

10. Near the final stages I deepen the shadows and make slight hue and value adjustments in the lights with **glazing**—paint with more medium mixed in to make the layers transparent or semitransparent. Here you see the completed *Auriform (Polished Abalone Shell)* (oil, 11x14).



Materials

Drawing materials: Mylar frosted drafting film, **Staedtler** Lumograph graphite pencils (2H-B), retractable eraser, kneaded eraser

Painting surface: **Artboard** fiber plywood panel

Surface preparation: self-prepared gesso (for recipe and instructions, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonline.toc), 150- to 200-grit sandpaper, 1:5 mixture of **Winsor & Newton** damar varnish and **Martin/F. Weber** Turpenoid odorless mineral spirits (to seal drawing)

Paint: **Holbein** flake white, alizarin crimson, Mars red, cadmium red, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow, yellow ochre, viridian green, sap green, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, burnt umber, raw umber

Mediums: two parts **Gamblin** refined linseed oil to one part **Martin/F. Weber** Turpenoid odorless mineral spirits (for underpainting); equal parts **Gamblin** refined linseed oil and **Gamblin** stand oil (for painting)

Brushes: **Daler-Rowney** Robert Simmons white sable filberts (Nos. 1, 4 and 10) and rounds (Nos. 1, 003 and 008)

Brush cleaning: **Martin/F. Weber** Turpenoid Natural, **Silicoil** jar

Still life setup: **IKEA** Besta shelf unit (to put setup at optimal height)

Meet Sadie J. Valeri

Sadie J. Valeri received her bachelor of fine arts degree in illustration from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1993. She also studied under Juliette Aristides, Michael Grimaldi and Ted Seth Jacobs at Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier in San Francisco; Jacob Collins at the Hudson River Fellowship in New York; and Timothy Stotz and Michelle Tully of Studio Escalier in France. In addition, Valeri studied *écorché* anatomy with Andrew Ameral and learned traditional Flemish layered painting technique from Kirstine Reiner. She has taught graduate students at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and founded the blog womenpaintingwomen.blogspot.com, which features the art of contemporary women figurative painters. Valeri currently teaches workshops and classes at Sadie Valeri Atelier in San Francisco. Visit her website and blog at www.sadievaleri.com.

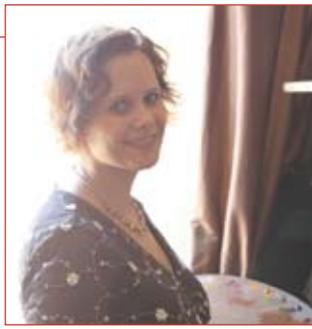


Photo by Nowell Valeri



To see more of Valeri's art, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

the values she's already worked out. "True color is saturated (high chroma) in the midtones and desaturated (low chroma) in the lightest lights and darkest shadows," she says. "This is what transforms a monochromatic painting into full color, and that transformation is only possible with opaque color layers completely covering the grisaille underpainting."

Valeri uses a limited palette: "just a few primaries and a couple of secondaries plus flake white, in both transparent and opaque pigments." (See Materials, page **, for paint colors.) With these pigments she mixes additional strings of color that correspond to the value transitions she sees on a given object. "I always paint in small, distinct tiles (areas), working from the shadows up into the lights," she says. "I work just one small area at a time up to the highest finish possible and leave that area to dry for a couple of days while I work on other areas of the painting." For the final stages of the painting, Valeri uses "fairly transparent paint, sometimes as glazes, to make subtle adjustments to the colors set in earlier layers." (See Precise Line, Value and Color, steps 8–10; page **.)

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more layers, using small brushes." (See Precise Line, Value and Color, steps 6–7; page **.)

Opaque Color

Having completed her grisaille underpaintings, the artist moves into full color. Her goal at this stage is not to simply embellish the grisaille with color, as that would "merely give the look of a tinted black-and-white photograph." Instead, Valeri works mostly with opaque color until the very last stages, using the underpainting as a guide to help her match

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Time Is On Her Side

Valeri's painting process is detailed and time-consuming. A small (9x12 or 11x14) still life requires roughly a month of work from initial drawing to finished painting. "When I teach my process to students, they're sometimes mystified as to why we go through all the different steps and stages; painting directly seems easier to them," she says. "It's at the end of the process, when there are *ab-has* all around the studio as students achieve levels of realism they never thought they were capable of, that they start to understand how powerful this process can be." ■

MICHAEL LACOY is an artist, writer and editor living in Cambridge, Massachusetts.