

TINA BOHLMAN

# Prepare to Control Watercolors, Then Let Them Have Their Way

When using watercolors on location, this Texas artist recommends doing thumbnail sketches, thinking through the sequence of paint application, anticipating how the watercolor will dry, then allowing the transparent colors to guide you to a conclusion

There was a time when Tina Bohlman had only enough money to buy gas for the trip to a weekend art fair, leaving her no choice but to sell enough of her watercolor paintings to buy fuel for the trip back home to Texas. She was a single mother of two, spending weekdays painting and weekends at art fairs in Oklahoma and as far away as Nevada, Illinois, Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Her passion for watercolor was great enough to get her through those challenging years, and now that her son and daughter are grown, she and her husband are able to enjoy a return on the investment she made in herself.

The story of Bohlman's struggle for recognition and sales dispels the Victorian idea that watercolorists are dainty ladies who create pictures to occupy their time and decorate their parlors. "It took me 10 years to learn how to handle the paints and create a stack of paintings I could be proud of," Bohlman says, "but I knew from the start that no other paint excited and challenged me like watercolor. Then as now, I become so absorbed in the painting process after laying out a plan that I have to be careful where I set up my easel outdoors." She adds with a laugh, "If a mugger approached me, I wouldn't notice him until he grabbed my paintbrush."

Sometimes Bohlman is so eager to paint that she skips all preliminary planning and just starts brushing fluid colors across a sheet of watercolor paper. "That usually doesn't result in a good painting," she says, "but it helps me settle down to a



**Tlaquepaque View**

2010, watercolor, 11 x 14 in.

Plein air

*This painting was created during the Quick Draw competition at the Sedona Plein Air Festival.*

## Demonstration: Sodek's Farm



**STEP 1:** Keeping her thumbnail compositional sketches next to her painting, Bohlman draws the outlines of the major shapes of her farm scene on a 12 x 16-inch block of Arches 300-lb. cold-pressed watercolor paper.



**STEP 2:** Bohlman wets the surface of the paper with clear water using a 1-inch flat wash brush and applies washes of cobalt blue to establish the sky. She then adds a small amount of new gamboge to the cobalt blue wash and paints the defining shapes of the trees in the background.



**STEP 3:** The artist brings the center of interest to near completion in color and value; the barn and shed are almost finished.



**STEP 4:** Having placed the lightest values next to the darkest, Bohlman works on the silo and foreground alternately, using a 1-inch flat brush loaded with quinacridone burnt orange to create the appearance of rust along the top and sides with a downward brushstroke. She then re-wets the foreground with clear water and brushes on a stronger mixture of cobalt blue violet and yellow ochre to add shadows and give texture to the pasture grass.

**STEP 5:** The artist adds a few dark accents on the shadow side of the barn and more definition and texture in the background trees.

Back in the studio, she checked values and color under indoor lighting and decided no further adjustments were necessary, and signed the painting.

### COMPLETED PAINTING:

#### Sodek's Farm

2012, watercolor, 12 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air







### **Awesome Autumn**

2008, watercolor, 20 x 24 in.  
Studio

more careful approach. The odds of success are greatly improved by establishing a very deliberate plan with thumbnail value sketches, lightly drawing the major shapes on the watercolor paper, planning the sequential application of progressively darker and more translucent colors, and then freeing myself to execute the painting I see in my mind's eye.

"On average, I can plan and control about 80 percent of the painting process, and the rest is dependent on what the paint wants to do. There is always an element of surprise because every stroke of paint performs differently, depending on the pigments and water I mix together, the humidity in the air, the way I stroke the brush across the paper, the angle of the painting surface, and my mood. If I'm not willing to go with what the watercolors want to do, I'm likely to wind up with a big mess."

The thumbnail sketches Bohlman refers to are small graphite drawings she makes while standing in one spot and sketching the view in several directions. "I set up my easel so I'm facing into the sun, or at an angle that will not have the bright sunlight coming over my shoulder and hitting the surfaces of my palette or paper," she says. "Then I make two or three quick sketches of the scene in front of me and to the left and right, just to determine which arrangement of value shapes might give me the best painting. I also consider whether a tree, shrub, barn, or sign might be lifted from one view and incorporated into another, or whether


the composition would be improved by eliminating objects in the view I've chosen.

"When I'm confident about the design of the painting, I lightly draw the outlines of the major shapes with graphite on a sheet of 300-pound unstretched Arches cold-pressed watercolor paper. I use Silver Black Velvet brushes and have the following Daniel Smith colors laid out on my John Pike watercolor palette: ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cobalt blue violet, alizarin crimson, Hansa yellow, new gamboge, sap green, cadmium orange, quinacridone rose, transparent pyrrole orange, yellow ochre, and Winsor & Newton burnt sienna. My field easel, the En Plein Air Pro Easel designed by artist Eric Michaels, is laid out with the same colors." When painting on location, Bohlman fills three or four empty Listerine mouthwash bottles with water and fits them into a backpack with her painting supplies.

When Bohlman is ready to develop a plein air painting, she puts her thumbnail sketch on the ground or clips it to her easel and starts painting. "I start with light values, usually in the sky and background, then proceed by marking the pattern of sunlight and shadow with combinations of warm yellow ochre and cool cobalt blue violet," she says. "That quickly gives me an idea of where I'm going with a painting, and once I've committed to that composition, I don't change it even if the light varies during the time I'm painting. Some colors can be lifted cleanly off the paper, but most of them have some staining properties, which will make it very difficult to get back to the white of the paper without adversely altering the sizing.

"I keep in mind that watercolors dry lighter in value than they appear when wet, so

I compensate for that by applying strokes that are slightly more intense than I want in the final picture. My procedure is fairly traditional in that I paint from light values to dark ones, reserving the white of the paper for the brightest accents.

"If anything, I am most concerned with the middle values, and then finish up with a few dark accents or linear strokes applied toward the end of the painting process. I spend about 90 minutes on a painting while on location, and much longer in the studio." 

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.



### **South Alley Street**

2011, watercolor, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

## **ARTIST DATA**

**NAME:** Tina Bohlman

**BIRTHDATE:** 1942

**LOCATION:** Waxahachie, TX

**INFLUENCES:** My great-grandmother, painter and poet; my mom; John Singer Sargent; Winslow Homer; John Pike; Andrew Wyeth; David Lyle Millard; Irving Shapiro; Eric Michaels; Tom Hill; Jeannie Dobie; Joseph Zbukvic; Alvaro Castagnet; Jan Kuntz

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