

Being Present

ANNETTE SMITH BRINGS HER LOOSE, IMPRESSIONISTIC STYLE TO LIVE STUDIO SESSIONS, PAINTING VIBRANT PORTRAITS THAT CAPTURE A MOMENT IN TIME.

By Amy Leibrock

Once or twice a week, you can find Annette Smith at an open live-studio session at Scottsdale Artists' School, in Scottsdale, Ariz., where she's one of the few watercolorists painting a model over the course of a few hours. "I'm pretty much addicted to painting from life," she says. "It's an escape, almost like going on an artistic vacation. I'm in the moment."

Smith's loose, impressionistic portraits and figures definitely feel "of the moment." They're skillfully rendered so just enough of the subject emerges from a background of pale washes. Drips and spatters are evidence of the flurry of action it takes to get everything down before the live session ends, and the final outcome captures a moment that feels eternally lively and organic.

Knowing when to stop can be a challenge for Smith, so having a timed studio deadline helps her maintain her focus and complete a painting in one session.

OPPOSITE
Renaissance Man
(watercolor on
paper, 14x10½)



H. Gantli



LEFT
Emille
(watercolor on
paper, 11x8½)

OPPOSITE
Tom
(watercolor on
paper, 22x15)

EMBRACING THE MAGIC

Smith has been drawing since she was a child, growing up on a farm in Wisconsin. She fondly remembers drawing a face for the first time and thinking, “Oh, I love this. This is all I ever want to do.” A high school teacher introduced her to watercolor, and by embracing this new medium, Smith was able to help fund her first year of fine arts school by selling landscape paintings featuring barns. She eventually got married, moved to Arizona, raised three children and had a career

in giftware manufacturing. But in 1998, she decided it was time to devote more attention to her art and develop a body of work. She began taking art classes and gravitated to drawing from life. “I enjoyed the idea of catching the pose, the structure,” she says. “It was just like magic for me.”

That magic hasn’t worn off. While Smith especially likes to paint older people dressed in period or native costumes, such as *Renaissance Man* (page 17), she also finds great beauty in a simple gesture, pose or expression, as in *Emille* (above).



“The goal is to make sure that everything is integrated, that the background is actually part of the model and vice versa.” —ANNETTE SMITH



Nick (watercolor on paper, 15x11)

WORKING FROM LIFE

During a typical live model session, Smith attaches a sheet of Arches 140-lb. rough- or cold-pressed paper onto Gatorboard and secures it with clips or staples. She then spends the first 20 to 40 minutes drawing the subject's facial structure, features and clothing with a mechanical pencil. "The drawing is so key," she says. "You need to understand anatomy fairly well to draw the model in a limited amount of time without tracing it."

Next, the artist plans out the colors for the background, skin tones, hair and clothing by preparing various puddles of paint. "Lots of fresh paint on your palette is essential when working in a live session," Smith notes. "In a timed setting, there isn't time to reconstitute dried-up paints."

Her go-to watercolors are Holbein, Winsor & Newton and Daniel Smith. In fact, she's quite brand-specific in her portrait-palette selections, relying on Holbein raw sienna; Winsor & Newton cerulean blue, cadmium red and carmine; and Daniel Smith cobalt blue and French ultramarine. "I prefer these paints because I know how they act and how I can manipulate them on paper," she says.

Once her palette is prepped, Smith says she creates "controlled chaos," using a large round brush to block in big background shapes quickly with rich color washes of similar value. "I plop down a bunch of colors—a stroke here, a color there—and let them blend together, or I manipulate the brush to bring them all together at once," she says. She also pulls those background washes right into the hair or

Working Live

Here are Smith's 5 best tips for painting a watercolor portrait at a live, studio session.

1. **Make a careful drawing, even if you feel rushed.** Use a pencil or slender wooden dowel for "sighting" and "comparative measurement." This helps with proportion and drawing accuracy.
2. **Have plenty of fresh pigment squeezed into your paint wells.** It takes too much time trying to revive dried-up paint. Bring scrap watercolor paper along on which to test color and value.
3. **The paint puddles in your palette's mixing area should be the consistency of whole milk or cream, not runny.** Let colors mix on the paper; do not overmix on the palette.
4. **Take the time to clean your palette and get clean water during model breaks.** You want to start the next session with fresh paint.
5. **Take a break when the model takes a break.** Walk away from your work and view it from a distance. Taking a break gives your eyes and brain a rest. When you come back, you'll see with fresh eyes and will be better able to concentrate.



Anita (watercolor on paper, 17x13)



Pow Wow Dancer (watercolor on paper, 22x15)



Marisa (watercolor on paper, 14½x10½)

parts of the face. “It’s kind of chaotic, but it’s all one value,” Smith continues. “And then I come back later, and I ‘find’ the person in all the color I’ve laid down. I like to give a feeling of the image just emerging from space.”

With the background set, Smith quickly adds skin tones to the face and neck, saving a highlight on the forehead or the tip of the nose. She also might add a dark so she can key in future values. “The goal is to make sure that everything is integrated, that the background is actually part of the model and vice versa,” she says.

FINDING THE ESSENCE

At this stage, Smith takes a break and waits for the wash to dry so she can evaluate the values. After that, she starts placing the mid-tones and often develops an eye to key in the values. Here, she slows down and sculpts the planes of the subject’s face by slowly building layer upon layer, working her way down the face and neck. She then develops the hair and clothing, making sure to soften the edges to integrate the figure into the background. When working from life, Smith uses reference photos of the model to finish painting the hands. After the model returns from a break, the hands may not be in the exact same position, so having photos of the pose can be helpful.

And what about those drips that add so much character to her portraits? “They’re all accidents,” she says. “They’re not artfully placed at all.” Smith works vertically because working flat skews the line of sight and can cause the

drawing’s proportions to be incorrect. She uses a brush-loading method she learned from watching renowned watercolorist Charles Reid (American, 1937–2019). She dips the brush in water first, shakes it off, picks up paint from the palette and then paints. “It’s a way to make sure there isn’t too much water in the brush so the paint won’t drip *everywhere*, but sometimes it does,” she says. “I just try to get something up there. Stuff happens.”

Smith’s ultimate goal in her work is to find the essence of the model. To do so, she keeps things simple and avoids overdeveloping the painting. “That’s not always easy,” she admits. “You get tired when painting from life; it helps to walk away so you see the work clearly.” She finds that a spyglass technique she observed Reid use is helpful at this stage. “He formed a ‘spyglass’ with one hand through which he looked at what he was painting,” she says. “This ‘spyglass’ technique helps me determine what’s important to the scene, and what is not. I find it’s very useful.”

After making any adjustments to the work, Smith adds the finishing touches to the hair and clothing, “but very carefully, because it’s so easy to overstate things, and I think less is more,” she notes. “You work on it until you’re happy. Sometimes you end up with winners, and sometimes you have losers.”

Amy Leibrock is a Cincinnati-based writer.

Turn the page for a demo. 

Flower Child

A session model is bathed in earthy-colored pastels as an ethereal nod to Mother Nature.



Step 1

Using a mechanical pencil, I lightly sketch the portrait on paper. I leave the pencil construction lines and allow them to become part of the painting.



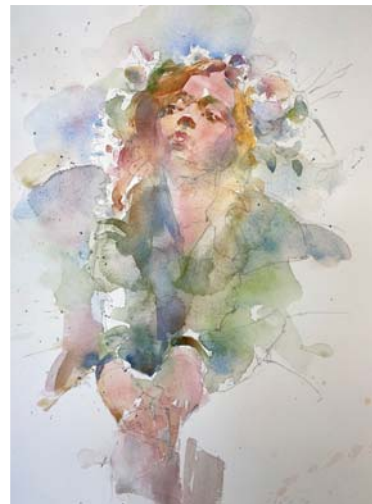
Step 2

Beginning in the background, I start the initial "block-in" wash on dry paper and drag this wash into elements of the hair and clothing. While this wash is still wet, I continue painting the hair, clothing and skin tones, saving the white of the paper for highlights such as the tip of the nose. I prefer to paint skin tones last in the initial block-in so the skin tone color will blend into the previous painted washes. A "back-run" developed in the block-in wash; I'll work around it.



Step 3

I began painting the features, eyes, sections of the hair and clothing. I added a few darks in the hair to help key in values and define the boundaries of the face. I painted the side planes of the lower face and then the nose, making sure to soften a few edges so they appear attached to the face. I began to indicate the flowers and leaves in the hair.



Step 4

I painted more value in the hair and the blue-green inside the sweater near the neckline and hands. As I painted the deeper value of the hair, I let the rich color flow into the wet blue-green shadow wash. Afterward, I painted the lips and the shadow shape beneath them. I was mindful to soften some edges around the mouth. I also added a little more pattern on the sweater and indicated the planar changes on the hands and forehead.

Artist's Toolkit

PAINTS

- Winsor & Newton: cadmium red, burnt sienna, permanent carmine, burnt umber, cadmium orange, cerulean blue, sap green
- Daniel Smith: cobalt blue, ultramarine blue
- Holbein: raw sienna, raw umber

SURFACE

- Arches 140-lb. cold-pressed paper

BRUSHES

- Nos. 8 and 12 Kolinsky rounds;
Loew-Cornell ½-inch synthetic flat

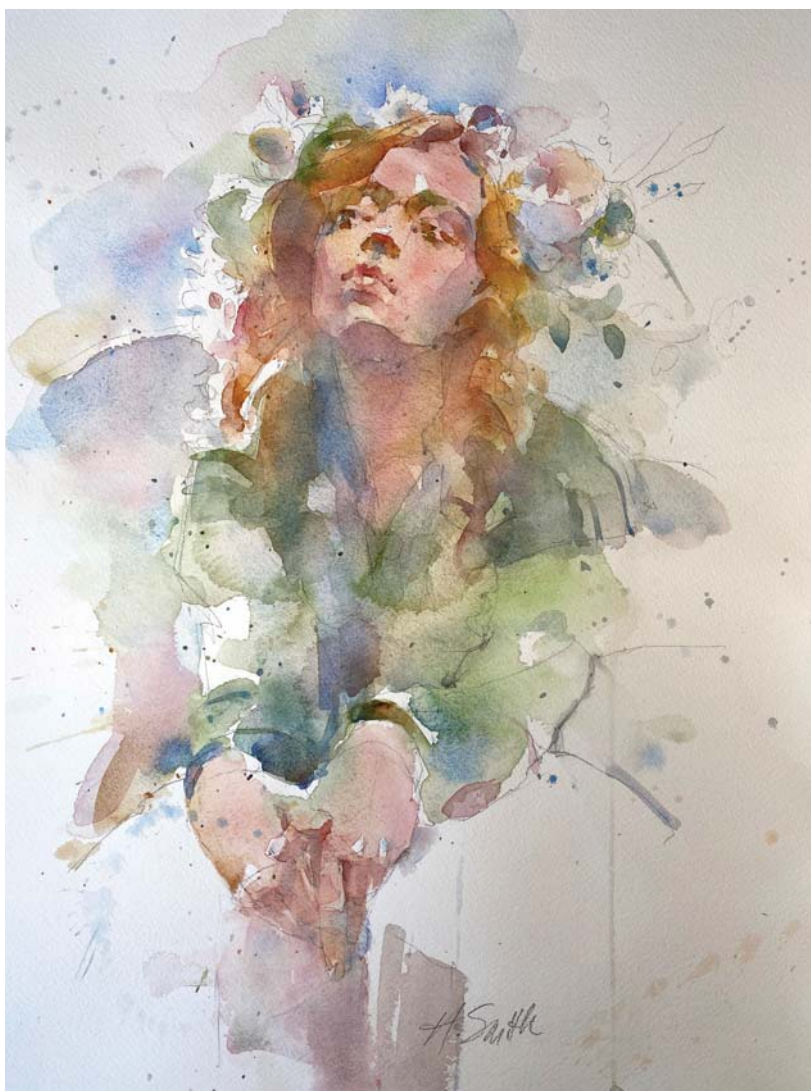
MISCELLANEOUS

- Gatorboard; office clips; 0.7mm mechanical office pencil; kneaded eraser; spray bottle; two water containers; old bath towel; tissues



Step 5

I painted the shadow shape beneath the chin to establish the jawline. I then added more wavy locks onto the clothing and more definition to the hands.



Final

I painted a bit more on the right shoulder. I also added wavy tresses to the hair so the shoulder and the hair would become one shape. I showed more separation between the fingers and then added spatters throughout to complete **Flower Child** (watercolor on paper, 18x13). **WA**