
MIRRORS OF MOVING WATER

Capture the reflective surfaces and quicksilver movements of water by exploiting the rich transparency of watercolor.

BY CATHERINE BEVERLY HAGAN



Contrast Is the Key

While hiking along the Oxtongue River in Algonquin Park, I was enchanted by a rush of color. The autumn foliage, the fiery sky at sunset—these intense reds collected in the swirling water. The paradox of fire in water is at the heart of Sundown, Oxtongue River Algonquin Park (watercolor, 22 x 30). To convey the sense of movement, I relied on dramatic contrasts in value (lights and darks), and the striking contrasts in temperature (warm and cool colors).

72 Watercolor Magic



Flow, turbulence, transparency, reflections—water is full of puzzles and paradoxes. Drop a rock into an eddy; skip a stone over the surface of a lake—the swirling water mimics the mysteries of the life cycle itself. Thinking about these mysteries inspires my paintings. In my work, I play with the movements of water in various natural settings, at different times of day, in reflection gardens—even in my own imagination.

Water is a rewarding subject, but it isn't an easy one. For one thing, water, even turbulent water, is more or less transparent. The transparency of watercolor gives you an immediate advantage, but retaining the transparency through repeated applications of color can be tricky. And water, unlike a still life set-up, moves. If a painting doesn't reflect transparency and movement, it may be pretty, but it won't look like water.

But don't despair. After years of studying water, including my share of mistakes, I've learned what works and what doesn't. Follow along to

quench your curiosity about the art of water-making—including the techniques and materials you'll need to bring water to life.

PLAYING WITH WATER

One way to learn about water is to repeat the science experiments you may have done in the second grade: watching objects float or sink; pouring water through a funnel; adding different agents (like soap flakes or gel medium) to water. Be sure to make mental notes and sketches. Even studying what happens when you divert water flow from a faucet can help you when you're trying to show water flowing over rocks.

Thus, if you're landlocked, you don't have to give up the dream of painting water. You just have to make sketches of whatever water sources you can find. But you should still exploit whatever traveling opportunities you do have by taking photos and making sketches on-site.

Watercolor is the perfect medium for painting water. Wetting the paper, injecting paint or watercolor inks onto the surface, moving the paper,

Beneath the Surface

Transparent watercolor is the perfect medium for painting water. In Garden Reflections (watercolor, 30 x 40) there are two layers of shapes—the underlying one is transparent; the top one is more opaque. I let the initial wet-into-wet washes of yellows and blues dry; then I painted more solid shapes with thicker concentrations of paint. This approach created a sense of interplay between the depths and the surface of the water.

and playing with the flow of colors—you can create the illusion of moving water without even trying too hard!

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

In my paintings, I may use a specific color grouping (e.g., blues and greens), but I use all kinds of paints. For very dark areas I often layer staining colors (Winsor blue, permanent rose and Winsor green, for example). I use staining colors to convey the luminosity of water because they won't lift off as more washes are applied. For example, if I start out by washing an area with Winsor yellow, I'll still be able to see a sense of light through subsequent layers of color.



Moving Diagonals

Basic to the process of capturing the essence of water is how I set up my paintings. When the movement of the water I'm painting is very subtle, a horizontal treatment works well. In paintings where the water is flowing very fast, however, I often set the image up in diagonals. Strong diagonal movement and lines rather than patterns give *Shallow* and *Deep* (acrylic, 24 x 36), the illusion of a rushing stream.

Mirror-like Movement

In clear, deep water on a calm day, I've often observed the reflection of rocks superimposed on the reflection of clouds. Both reflections show only slight distortion in *Dark Sky* (watercolor and gouache, 22 x 30). The white suggesting waves in the foreground is the white of the paper. To delineate the shapes I'd saved from the initial wash of color, I applied white gouache sparingly. My intent was to keep the white of the paper as a significant element of the composition.



A color wheel is a vital tool, so I've got several posted in my studio. I frequently refer to a wheel as I try to expand my range of harmonizing colors. Remember, color is relative; a "right" or harmonious color depends on what it's next to. A color wheel helps me retain a sense of possibilities—the range of colors that are adjacent to the ones I'm working with and thus are in the same temperature range.

In general, I start out with a wet wash; then I apply layers of staining colors. Often I'll pour a color over only one

portion of the painting so as not to disturb the underlying patterns I've already created.

Sometimes I'll convey the illusion of a mirrored surface, as in *Dark Sky* (see directly above). To show the water moving, I blurred the reflection. I also painted the rocks at a warmer temperature than what they were in reality to suggest a contrast between the safe shore and the treacherous, dark waters.

While I rely on transparent watercolors, I occasionally use gouache for finishing touches, particularly if I'm try-

ing to contrast the transparent and opaque qualities of moving water. Usually, I get the effect I'm after by mixing small quantities of white gouache with transparent watercolor. On the other hand, in *Dark Sky*, I enhanced the shapes of saved white areas by adding touches of pure white gouache. This delineated the shapes, while allowing the white paper to dominate.

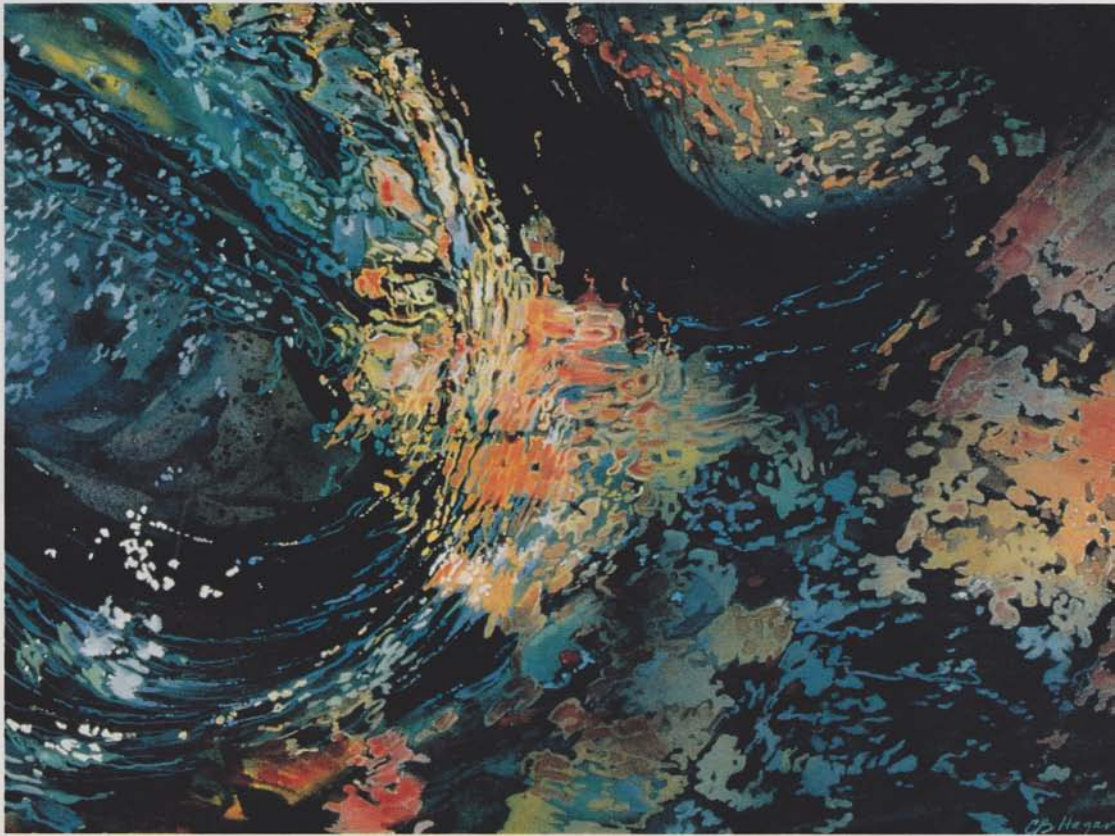
CAPTURING PATTERNS

Gentle currents—the kind you'd find in a garden pond—reflect some objects and re-

fract others. Objects mirrored on the surface of the water are often distorted. To suggest the waters' movement, I'm careful to see and paint reflections as shapes, which inevitably form patterns. A shift from larger shapes to smaller shapes indicates depth and movement. The pattern changes as the water changes. (See *Garden Reflections* on the previous page).

DIAGONALS AND MOVEMENT

To paint fast, moving water, you have to focus on line rath-



Negatives and Positives

Standing in the water along the shoreline of Gargantua Bay, Lake Superior, I grew interested in the transparent quality of water lapping on rocks and pebbles and the dance of light and reflection in the water movement itself. The resulting painting is *Underwater Jewels* (watercolor, 22 x 30). In order to achieve the darks, I painted many negative shapes around washes and added positive shapes later. The play of negatives and positives describes the movement and the light.



SKETCHING THE ESSENCE

My paintings often have their origin in flashes of discovery: I stumble upon a breathtaking scene while I'm exploring the wilderness on hiking or canoeing trips. I carry only a knapsack, so I only have room for a tiny sketchbook, a few pencils and a pencil sharpener. I work fast—sketching the lines that comprise the patterns, noting the time of day and the depth of color. I try to catch the essence of what grabbed me. The essence often lies in the details; thus, my sketches are studies in line rather than in value.

Scale and Perspective

Many of my water paintings deal with small areas of color or a portion of the reflection, but in *Vast Moving Lake* (watercolor, 22 x 30), I played with the larger body of water and movement toward a channel in the distance. The scale of the patterns of movement changed in both size and in their connections to each other from the vanishing point to the front of the painting.



er than pattern or shape. You have to show the strong “V’s” of the currents. Movement has to seem clear, not blurred. I often juxtapose warm areas with cool areas. The tension between the warm and cool swatches will imply motion. In addition, a diagonal line—gesturally suggested instead of drawn—can help imply the water’s rushing movement (see *Shallow and Deep* on the third page of this article).

SCALE AND PERSPECTIVE

The movement of water channeling into a funnel at the end

of a small lake provided the inspiration for *Vast Moving Lake* (see above). I chose to place the land formation at the top; I painted it in an undefined manner because I wanted to focus on the fluctuating colors of the water. I implied the movement of the water by noting contrasts in scale—from the very large shapes of clouds reflected in the water of the foreground to the small, dark shapes that receded into the background.

Vast Moving Lake gave me a great deal of difficulty; it kicked around in my studio

until I found the key: careful observation of the size of and the connections between the reflected shapes.

NECESSARY INCUBATION

Just as you would spend time gazing at a body of water, you should gaze at your work. It’s essential to look, look and look again. My family, too, watches the work in progress; often their comments make me reevaluate my original intentions. I’m also fortunate to have a friend who is also a colleague; she drops by and comments on my paintings in

progress. Finally, I always have a number of “starts” on the go. As one painting incubates, I turn to another. I thus can trash paintings without feeling too much despair.

Creativity demands that you make mistakes and try again. It’s vital to believe that no painting is precious. You can ruin a painting by being too careful, just as you can ruin a painting by being too impulsive. I only grow as a painter when I experiment. Thus, I have learned that taking risks is what making art is all about. ♦

STAINING VS. NON-STAINING COLORS

I use staining colors to convey luminosity. A staining color tints a paper’s fiber like a dye. A preliminary wash of a staining color like Winsor red, for example, will show through subsequent glazes and imply a sense of light.

A non-staining color doesn’t penetrate a paper’s fiber—you can lift it. Opaque, sedimentary or transparent colors can be either staining or non-staining. To test a color’s staining quality, apply a brushstroke to your paper and let it dry. With a wet brush, loosen the pigment, then blot off the residue with tissue. A staining color will leave a strong impression on the paper.



“Many of my paintings have their inspiration in hiking and canoeing trips. I’m always struck by how much abstraction there is in nature, and this is a large part of my painting,” says artist Catherine Beverly Hagan. Hagan, who recently received her doctorate from the University of Toronto, OISE/UT, has worked as an artist in residence at the Leighton Studios at the Banff School of Art and has painted at l’Atelier du Seguret in Provence, France. A member of Ontario Society of Artists, The Learned Congress and the Canadian Society of Painters of Water Colour, Hagan lives in Willowdale, Ontario, where her work is represented by the McLaren Barnes Gallery, Oakville, Ontario. Hagan is a popular speaker on the integration of the arts into holistic learning, creativity and the value of art in life-long discovery. She frequently consults with major corporations, designing in-house training on instructional design, and developing CD-ROM’s and leading-edge training manuals.