



Above, Yano, 20"x18"

# IVA MORRIS

*Combining  
underpainting  
with fresh, fast,  
accurate color  
in pastels*

BY RUTH SUMMER

IVA MORRIS has a BA in Art Education from the University of New Mexico. She has amassed an impressive number of awards in her relatively short career as a pastel artist. Her work has been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions, and taken first prize in several national or juried shows. She is represented by galleries in Santa Fe, New Mexico and in California.

When the spare-room studio in the house became too small, Iva Morris and her husband Brian O'Connor added a huge prefab outbuilding. Modified to create their perfect work space, it houses Iva's pastel painting area and Brian's painting area, as well as some shared space.

A large piece of foamcore in the corner covered with a child's marker drawing is evidence that it's also family area, created for additional space and

not necessarily for privacy from the rest of the house.

"Usually there are kids and dogs running through here, too," Iva says. The three dogs in question race around the building, desperate to be included in the interview, pausing only to look in the long vertical windows that illuminate the space.

The pastel part of the studio is well organized; various shelf units and cabinets line the walls wherever there are no windows, and Iva's easel and table for pastels sit out in the middle of the room. There are different brands and types of pastels spread out all over the table, all in more or less their original boxes. Iva says her main concern is not the pastel she's using, or how they're arranged, but what color she can get on the paper.

"When I first came to New Mexico



years ago," Iva recalls, "it took some getting used to the colors. It's a very different place from West Virginia and Maryland, where I grew up. Painting there requires a totally different palette, a much higher key. The last time I was back east I took some pictures, thinking I'd paint from them when I got home. I'd forgotten about the atmosphere, of course, and the photos came out with white skies and gray greens, not at all how it looked. New Mexico spoils you," she laughs, "the skies are so blue that you can be a really bad photographer and still be able to paint from your photos."

On Iva's easel is an underpainting waiting for its layers of pastel. "I work outside," Iva explains, "but rarely with much pastel on site. I do a complete value-study underpainting in gouache, then bring it in to finish or work from in the studio later." She says her main consideration in plein air painting is "the logistics—I just don't like hauling all that stuff."

Printmaking was Iva's medium for years, until she began to develop allergies to her materials. Although she had been an oil painter her whole life, she suddenly became sensitive to those products as well. "It was terrible," she says, "I'd have to wear gloves and a respirator and everything just to try to paint. Finally I got completely out of printing, sold the press, and barely painted at all." She says her art career was pretty much halted until she began working in pastels. "The pastels are really far less toxic and you can protect against them more easily." She says she does use barrier cream when painting, and now that she has Wallis paper, she avoids even turpenoid by using water.

Iva has been painting with pastels only a little over five years. "When I first started, I took a class with Deborah Christensen. Then I joined the Pastel Society of New Mexico and started showing and selling my paintings."

She says her painting technique has not changed drastically since the days she was painting in oils. "My approach



is pretty traditional," she explains. "First, I like to start with a toned ground of a medium value. This way I'm not working against the color of the paper. I like to leave some parts really sketchy, and utilize that background tone. It's kind of like filling in all the blanks that are not that color; I don't have to do so much work. I like the lazy way," Iva claims. "Sometimes you just let things happen, and they fit."

"The underpainting is really important in terms of the drawing as well," she continues. "If your drawing or un-

derpainting has some problem, you might as well give it up, you're not going to be able to fix it in the painting. But once I get the underpainting right, then I start with the layers of pastel. If I just used pastel, it would get muddy with all the layers I add, so I use water between layers, the way some people might use fixative.

"I feel a need to somehow create a glaze between colors, like I would with oil paint and a painting medium, so I combine water with different consistencies of pastels. Pastels Girault, for ex-

*Above, Jones Dairy, 24"x35"; below, Near Zuni, 24"x35"*







Top, *Acequia*, 28"x35"; above, *Summer Walk*, 18"x24"

ample, are a medium-hard pastel that I use a lot for a glazed effect; then when I want another color to sit on top of that, I use something softer, more buttery, like the Unisons."

Iva says she started experimenting with water partly from the search for "a good rich dark." She explains further, "I started using gouache underneath, black and sepia tones, to establish those dark values. Then it just evolved into a whole underpainting in the gouache, getting everything laid out. This really simplifies things for me; with the values already in the underpainting, I can separate out the color, and not have to think about too many things at once."

"Probably because of my printmaking background, I see colors in layers. You have to take apart the color, think what color would have to be underneath to get the color you're seeing in your mind." As she works each pastel layer, Iva uses brush and water to so-



lify the colors she achieves. "I go back in with the water and even the gouache for the really dark parts," she adds.

Reticulated color is one of the things Iva says she loves about using the water and pastel mixture. "The water can cause the pastel color to kind of swirl around beautifully on the paper," she says, "creating a texture in the glazed underpainting that can be seen through the pastel. It's a wonderful technique for painting rocks, or especially for painting water. Just a quick glaze over your underpainting and the water surface may be done; you don't have to overwork it. You could spend hours getting the glazed effect with a pencil, too, but I like to cheat wherever I can."

Using so much water in her technique, the paper surface became very important. "The Wallis paper is great, and it's pretty tough," Iva says, "but I got too much water on one painting and it wrinkled pretty badly. I called Kitty Wallis and we talked about it; finally I sponged water on the back and it straightened out. But then when the painting went back east and got into some humidity, it wrinkled again.

"The answer to the problem turned out to be dry-mounting. Now I have the Wallis paper dry-mounted onto gatorboard, and it's perfect. Even if you don't use much water, it's a nice method, makes the paper or painting easier to handle; the wind won't catch it if you're working outside." Iva also points out that many copy shops will dry-mount paper for a lower cost than art-framing stores.

Iva often mentions that she likes "the lazy way," or likes to cut corners or "cheat" in her techniques. Her paintings show no evidence of any corner-cutting; it's possible that she's just getting to the finished product sooner and more efficiently than she once did, and doesn't recognize this as a skill. She does stress simplicity when talking about her work.

"The thing I like about using the complete value underpainting," she says, "is that it lets me separate out and



Above, *Sandcastle*, 32"x35"; below, *Ralph & Martha's Vacation*, 14"x16"

simplify the color. This line of dark trees for instance—without the underpainting, I'd have to start with the really dark greens here, and by the time I got all the colors I wanted on there it would be muddy. But when the darkness is already in the underpainting, I can just glaze it with a dark green and get an instant dark green color that is not chalky and worn out."

Surface texture is very important to Iva. "You know how sometimes you see a painting from across the room and it

looks pretty good, but then you go up to look at it closely and you can see it's really overworked. A really good painting will stand up to that close inspection; it should be fresh and fast." She says she's always been a fan of Sargent's work because of his ability to keep that freshness in the work. "He's like the Michael Jordan of the art world or something," she laughs. "No mistakes, no fuss, always just exactly the right value and color. I try to work toward that kind of freshness."







Above, *After Thanksgiving*, 18"x24"

Getting the same feel in a larger painting as one does in the small sketch is the tricky part, Iva says. "Outside I work small and fast, and try to make every mark count. It's a different energy, and can capture the mood, the light, and the feeling much more accurately. The other thing is the size of the mark relative to the size of the paper—in a small painting you can make a whole mountain with just a stroke. When you go to a big piece and have to add many more strokes to get that same mountain, it's easy to overwork it."

One way Iva avoids overworked areas is by constantly turning the painting. "I work upside down a lot," she says, "even when I work outside. When I put marks in a large area, it helps vary the mark, give some movement or direction to the color. Especially the close foreground—that's really the part I have the hardest time getting to where I'm happy with it. I always look at my finished painting and want to chop off the bottom few inches. I seem to like them better when I turn the painting on its side or upside down to work on that part."

"Usually I start with the sky and work down when I start to put the color in," she says. "The values are already

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there in the underpainting so I don't have to worry about getting the darks in. I start at the top, then kind of work from the farthest away point, back to front. I use a lot less pastel in the background, and let it build up more as it gets down into the close-up area. I think the amount of pastel used should always correspond to the placement in the landscape—the horizon line may be just a mere suggestion, the mountains just a glaze over the underpainting, while the grasses in the foreground can take a lot more build-up and texture.

"Pastel is a very physical medium," Iva observes. "You can do so much with different textures and thicknesses. When you use oil paint, to get different textures you have to add stuff to the paint—pumice or extenders or whatever—but with pastels it's all right there. You can go out to paint with five colors of oil paint and mix hundreds of colors;

with pastels you can try to take five hundred with you, or you can make the colors you want by building the layers and letting them blend visually." Iva says she prefers to let the eye blend the colors and doesn't like to blend them with her fingers.

As she explains how she works, Iva repeatedly mentions that she's about to try it another way. She's developed her own style, although based on a traditional approach, and now she thinks it's time to shake things up. New materials, new subjects, new ideas are calling to her, she says.

"You can just get locked into doing things a certain way," she says, "because that's how you've been doing it—it's comfortable, and it seems to be working. But after a while it's kind of like going to a recipe box—you can see a particular scene and your brain says, 'okay, cloud painting, I know how to do that' and pulls it out of the file. I think that's a danger, that your work can lose freshness when your painting method gets too comfortable. So that's my plan now," she concludes, "I'm getting ready to take all those recipes out and shuffle them up, mess up the files and start again."

■ *Ruth Summer is a pastel artist and writer, and associate editor of The Pastel Journal.*



Iva Morris