

Just as her beloved floral subjects
come into their own each season,
Barbara Fox expands her focus
to fully realize her passion.

awakenin

By Michelle Taute



Quick Thinking Barbara Fox was sitting by her living room window when she noticed the glow from her red sweater on her hands. She snapped a few photos of herself to capture the light and used those images as reference for *Indelible* (above; watercolor on paper, 9x14). For *Fire Rose* (at left; watercolor on paper, 21x29), she originally painted the entire flower, but cropped the painting to make the shapes more abstract and strengthen the composition.



Barbara Fox loves flowers—growing them, photographing them, painting them—but she's not content to stick with what she knows and loves. "I could paint nothing but flowers all the time, and they would probably all be very nice paintings," she says. "But I want to push myself to be the best artist I can be." For Fox, this means constantly challenging herself to try new techniques and paint subject matter beyond the realm of her beloved peonies and roses.

In this creative endeavor, she's tried her hand at *trompe l'oeil* effects and experimented with still life settings, even adding images of classic paintings to the backgrounds (see *Gladiola and van Gogh*, on page 52). And in the past couple of years, she's made a concerted effort to add portrait painting to the mix, a task she finds both exhilarating and frustrating. "Painting portraits is one of those things that if you just get the least little thing off, it's

not right," she says. It's a sharp contrast to her floral work, where she often takes liberties with the leaves and stems without losing a bloom's essence.

Fortunately, many of the upstate New Yorker's techniques appear to transfer seamlessly from one genre to the next. Whether you're looking at a lock of hair or a flower petal, it's hard not to admire the clean color and gorgeous light in her work. She makes certain that she rises to whatever artistic challenge she puts in front of herself.

Well-Rounded Palette

It's not surprising that Fox paints so many different subjects once you learn about her other professional pursuits. She's run her own design and illustration business since 1981, taking on everything from hand-painted needlepoint design and greeting card illustration to design work for the United States Mint.

the many colors of white

permanent rose | cobalt blue | ultramarine blue | peacock blue | dioxazine purple | Prussian blue | sap green | Hooker's green | new gamboge | lemon yellow | burnt umber

ultramarine blue,
Prussian blue
& burnt umber

permanent rose,
cobalt blue,
dioxazine purple
& Prussian blue

Hooker's green,
ultramarine blue
& Prussian blue

permanent rose,
cobalt blue &
dioxazine purple

Anatomy of a Bloom

"I love to capture the subtle colors present on a white flower," says Fox, "but the values seemed too garish when I had them just how I wanted them in *Royal White Peony* (watercolor on paper, 14x15). Alternating between dioxazine purple and Prussian blue, I painted light washes on the shadows of the flower to 'gray' the colors and make them unified."



cobalt blue,
permanent rose
& new gamboge

permanent rose,
new gamboge &
dioxazine purple

Hooker's green,
sap green,
Prussian blue &
dioxazine purple

peacock blue,
ultramarine blue,
burnt umber &
Hooker's green

permanent rose,
alizarin crimson
& dioxazine purple

lemon yellow &
peacock blue

permanent rose,
cobalt blue,
dioxazine purple
& Prussian blue

Ideally, she likes to keep a 50/50 mix between commercial projects and watercolor, but sometimes the only time she can find to paint is after dinner in her home studio. "My big, fat, audacious goal is to make a good living as an artist," Fox says. "But you have to follow all these other little goals to get to that point, and the only thing to do to lead up to all those little goals is paint."

Drawing, too, plays a large part in accomplishing the "little goals." Roughly two-and-a-half years ago Fox joined a figure-drawing

group that meets every Thursday night at the library, where women of various ages and skill levels come together for two hours to work from a live model. They socialize, share work and, most importantly, put pencil or charcoal to paper. "As much as we as artists know that we should be drawing, very few of us do it," she says. But thanks to this standing date, Fox has watched her figure-drawing skills improve dramatically.

The group experience has given her a stronger foundation for portrait painting; some of

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Green Thumb *Peony Blush* (watercolor on paper, 21x22) re-creates flowers from Fox's own garden. She used blue in the dark shadows to create depth and provide contrast to the pinks.



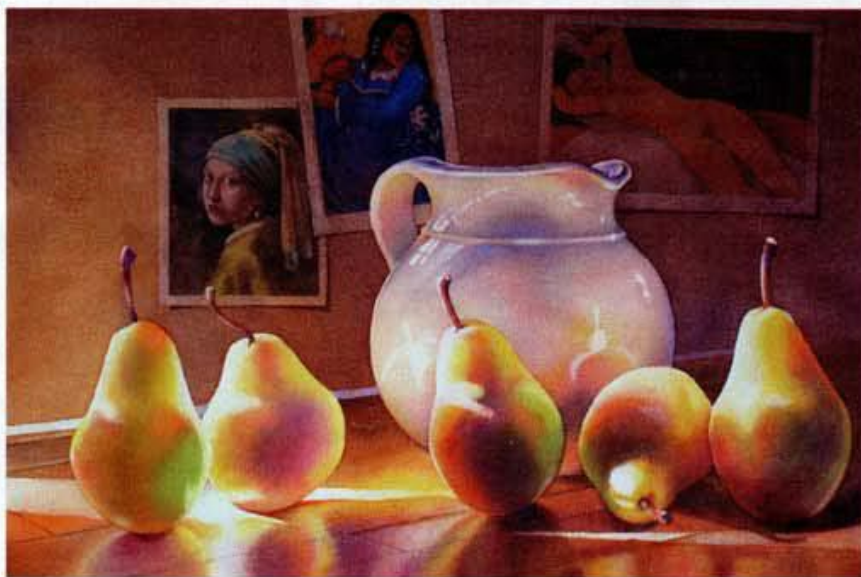
Getting Blue "Gladiola and van Gogh (watercolor on paper, 21x7) was inspired by the beautiful blue French provincial tablecloth," says Fox. "The two van Gogh postcards were added for a touch of more rich blue color, but they also help balance the composition."



Layers of Interest For *Peaches and Cream* (watercolor on paper, 22x21), Fox built up several washes to achieve its rich darks.

her weekly drawings have even inspired moody, monochromatic paintings. Fox says it's going to be a long time before she feels comfortable calling herself a portrait artist, though she's already completed several commissions and a series of compelling self-portraits. One of the latter, *Arrangement* (on page 54) incorporates a family photo, patterns and the artist's own hand to create a *trompe l'oeil* effect around her likeness. To paint the black-and-white image within the painting, Fox used purples to create the feeling of an old photo, and both warm and cool grays to keep the snapshot lively.

Experimentation such as this pushes Fox to learn new things and stay engaged with her work. She might admire a technique used in a painting she sees in a book or magazine and then try it out for herself. It's a challenge and a chance to test out new approaches that she might incorporate in her work. In some of her still lifes, she has branched out further still by adding postcards of famous works in the backgrounds (see *Peaches and Cream* and *Blessings*, above and opposite). She finds it both a lofty task and a pleasure to re-create *Girl With a Pearl*



Feminine Charm When she started *Blessings* (watercolor on paper, 13x19), Fox quickly realized that she needed something in the background, so she added art postcards that connect with the feminine shapes of the pears and the pitcher.

Earring or Degas' dancers, and these elements add another layer of interest for viewers.

Catching the Eye

A typical painting for Fox starts with one of her own reference photos. She shoots her flowers on sunny days and always looks for a strong light source for still life setups. "What really excites me about painting is seeing how the light creates its own shapes, changes the colors of objects and just makes whatever I'm painting look alive," she says. She'll do a small drawing from her reference photo then scan and blow it up to the size of her final painting. With a light box, she'll trace the basic lines of the drawing on her Jack Richeson 300-lb. cold-pressed paper. Then she makes the drawing more detailed, adding in shadows, color changes and any tweaks to the composition.

Next, she starts building up color in layers, generously wetting an area then flooding it with pure colors. She lets the colors mix right on the paper and works all over the sheet to build up bright color in layers. Then she uses this same layering technique to put in shadows and

deepen the colors within. Once that's dry, she goes back to adding color. She'll keep alternating between these two steps—working colors and working value—until the piece is almost complete. To capture highlights, she typically relies on the white of the paper. The artist might switch to drybrushing toward the end of a painting, when it's dangerous to work wet-into-wet with so many existing layers.

Sometimes Fox's technique makes for what might seem like unlikely color combinations, such as yellow, orange and purple in her pear still lifes. "If you mixed those colors on a palette, it would be horrible," Fox says. "But these colors look very fresh and lovely and edible. To me that's a really wonderful thing about watercolor: You can use these colors that you wouldn't ordinarily put together, but you can put them together in layers and get these beautiful shades." In fact, she doesn't believe in the notion that you should be sparing with paint to avoid muddy colors, a situation she says is easily avoided by layering pure colors.

Once she's finished a piece, a task that can take 30 to 40 hours, Fox puts each painting



Weaving a Story *In Arrangement* (watercolor on paper, 19x16), Fox added layers to this self-portrait's story with a family picture from her childhood and her own hand at the bottom of the piece. This approach also creates a *trompe l'oeil* effect.

four tips for vibrant color

Whether she's painting flowers or figures, Barbara Fox's work always includes gorgeous, clean colors. Here's how she does it:

1. Keep your paint and water fresh.

"I clean out my palette and put in fresh paint every time I work," says Fox. "I'm convinced this makes a difference. Once paint dries out, it just seems to lose a little something even when you refresh it with water."

2. Don't mix color on your palette.

Fox achieves strong, pure color by dropping her paint into wet areas and letting the colors mingle on the paper.

3. Invest in good materials.

"Use the best quality that you can afford," Fox says. "When your brushes start wearing out, buy new brushes. If your paper isn't doing what you want it to do, get better paper. Painting is hard enough without having to fight with your materials."

4. Direct the paint sparingly.

Fox doesn't push the paint around a lot with her brushes. Instead, she carefully lays down a generous amount of water to give the paint time to roll around in these wet areas. She also lifts and tilts the paper to direct the colors.



Affixed *Anchored* (watercolor on paper, 22x15) uses several different images to tell a story. "I think about this kind of self-portrait and visualize it for a long time before I begin painting," says Fox.

through its paces. She might look at the work in a mirror, hang the piece in her living room or even take a photo that she pulls into her computer to review. These changes in perspective help give her a true sense of a painting's strengths and weaknesses. "I try to look at it and think, is this as far as I can take it?" she says. "Is it exactly what I want it to be so that if I'm walking past it will catch my eye?" She wants her work, in a sense, to come into full bloom. ❧

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View more of the Barbara Fox's watercolors online at www.artistsnetwork.com/article/wc-fox-gallery.