



Seeing Painting

BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

According to **Carolyn Anderson**, painting is a combination of technique and creativity driven by visual interpretation. She contends that learning how the eye and mind process visual information develops a deeper understanding that, in turn, leads to the discovery of a personal visual language.

—
by Allison Malafrente

OPPOSITE PAGE
Waiting Backstage
2008, oil, 16 x 12.
All artwork this article
private collection unless
otherwise indicated.



In almost every classic art book or classroom in which painting is discussed, one of the first lessons learned is that being an artist starts with seeing. Or, as many come to realize, *relearning* how to see.

We quickly find out that somewhere along the way our brain has learned to assign visual symbols to certain words or objects that may not be in line with what our eye is actually observing. The next logical lesson is to unlearn these presumptions and retrain our eye to more accurately filter information to our brain so our hand can truthfully recreate what's in front of us. Montana artist Carolyn Anderson has more or less made a living out of this approach, not only because she travels the country sharing her visual-thinking philosophy with hundreds of eager students but also because she has used this understanding to develop a distinctive style that resonates with artists and collectors alike.

Anderson has spent decades researching how the eye and brain view and interpret information, and she was able to fully develop her understanding of this subject while teaching workshops for Walt Disney's Imagineering team many years ago. "Meeting so many dedicated and talented artists with such a wide variety of expertise was a great learning opportunity for me," the artist says. "But what was most edifying about this experience was the ability to use the Walt Disney Imagineering art library, which allowed me to further develop my interest in visual psychology and processing. As artists we deal with abundant visual possibilities and decisions, and being able to explore these possibilities with understanding gives us insight into what seeing is all about. The more we see, the more we know."

Anderson explains that although many artists are familiar with the expression "painting is all about seeing," few fully understand that much of what we see is filtered through preconceived assumptions and associations. Part of her instructional approach is helping artists unlearn these



ABOVE
Girl With Doll
2008, oil, 16 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Winter
2007, oil, 16 x 20.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW LEFT
Flamenco Dancer
2009, oil, 16 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW RIGHT
Father's Morning
2009, oil, 14 x 11.

tendencies so that they can ask the right kinds of questions and extract the proper information from what's in front of them. "As children we learn to recognize and create two-dimensional images representing our visual world," she explains. "These somewhat generic symbols of reality are usually simplistic in color—for example, grass is always green, skies are blue, apples are red—fairly flat, and lack any edge variation suggesting dimension and depth. The symbol for the object therefore becomes more important than the actual representation of our three-dimensional reality. Learning to see beyond the obvious and detect subtle nuances in color and value does not come naturally to us; it's something we must train ourselves to do through careful observation and repetition."

Organizing visual information around the basics—line, shape, value, and color—is an important tool in trying to see and paint beyond the obvious, Anderson says. She advises artists in her workshops to think in terms of geometric shapes and patterns from the beginning, draw generally, and use variation in shape and line to suggest the illusion





Teaching at Weekend With the Masters

Carolyn Anderson will be conducting a lecture on her visual language approach to painting—using examples from some of the great artists of the past to illustrate her points—as well as teaching two full-day portrait workshops at this year's Weekend With the Masters Workshop & Conference, September 23 through 26, at the Laguna Cliffs Marriott Resort & Spa and Laguna College of Art & Design. For more information, visit www.aamastersweekend.com.

of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. She also asks students to focus on what their eye is naturally attracted to and what it is they want to say through their paintings rather than try to recreate every detail, and she is herself partial to a more atmospheric, intuitive technique. "I prefer a more suggestive approach to form, and I try to push the visual elements of line, shape, value, and color to create dimension rather than strictly define it," she says. "And if there's one thing I've learned over many years of painting it's that I don't like predictability. I want my work to surprise me—say something visually that I find interesting or novel."

As part of this uncontrived approach, Anderson often starts her paintings strictly to explore the process rather than to create a finished work, and she rarely sticks to a preconceived idea of what the subject should look like. One of her favorite paintings, *Little Boy*, began as a small study exploring what she could do artistically with the subject of a young boy with beautiful curly hair. "I knew I didn't want to go in the typical cute-kid, blond-hair direction but instead

wanted to explore how far I could push the abstraction of his hair while still conveying the overall feeling of it," Anderson explains. "As the painting developed, I realized the features needed to be stronger to balance the surrounding brushwork, so I ended up pushing the value and color on the face to make a more continuous shape and stronger statement. The dark shape and value at the top of the painting serve as an anchor in the picture plane and also delineate the edge of the light on the hair. I allow myself to make these alterations as I work based on the visual information I'm observing, rather than following rules or expectations of what the image is supposed to look like. Although many of my paintings look real, I see them as line, shape, value, and color that merely suggest reality."

Anderson's self-described suggestive style that balances both abstraction and realism is certainly reminiscent of the Russian portraitists—particularly Fechin—and she does count them as influential. One of the main points that she tries to convey to her students, however, is to make sure they filter the work and technique of other artists—whether

BELOW

Study

2008, oil, 14 x 11.
Collection the artist.

RIGHT

Saubert's Fur Coat

2008, oil, 16 x 12.



ABOVE

Red Skirt

2009, oil, 20 x 16.

RIGHT

Before the Race

2006, oil, 9 x 12.





OPPOSITE PAGE

Little Boy

2005, oil, 10 x 8.

ABOVE

Little Girl

2006, oil, 12 x 9.



LEFT
Girl in Pink
2008. oil, 12 x 9.

About the Artist

Carolyn Anderson is a nationally recognized oil painter and pastel artist who resides in Havre, Montana. Known as a visual thinker, Anderson has spent many years studying how the brain sees and interprets information and was able to develop this subject further while teaching workshops for Walt Disney's Imagineering team. The artist has been an instructor for close to 20 years and has taught at numerous schools and institutions, including the Scottsdale Artists' School, in Arizona; the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; and the Fechin School, in Taos, New Mexico, among others. A member of Northwest Rendezvous and other important organizations, Anderson was recently elected to master membership in the American Impressionist Society. She is represented by Total Arts Gallery, in Taos, New Mexico; Gallery 1261, in Denver; and Simpson Gallagher Gallery, in Cody, Wyoming. For more information on Anderson, visit her website at www.carolynanderson.com.

living or deceased—through their own personal vision. “At some point almost all of us turn to other artists for inspiration, and I think that is healthy,” she says. “But we need to learn how to tell our own story, not copy someone else’s. We each see what is important to us, and our paintings should reflect the decisions we make about how something should look. That said, there is certainly a process of affinity, where you recognize and connect with those artists whose vision is in line with your own. I personally have a preference for some of the Russian painters, especially those whose brushwork, color, and values either exaggerate or sublimate important information. Many Russian Impressionist paintings are very expressive—the poetry of the storytelling becomes more important than the literal reality of the subject.”

In addition to studying the work of artists whose style resonates with you personally, Anderson also suggests doing exercises that loosen up creativity and allow the freedom to explore various options. This will, she says, lead to finding your own personal visual language. “One of the best ways to find a personal style is to concentrate a certain amount of time on paintings that don’t carry a high degree of expectation,” Anderson explains. “Most artists realize that in order to improve drawing skills they must do numerous sketches, but they often neglect to do the same with painting. Using cut sheets of canvas, gessoed panels or boards, or any durable surface that is not as costly as stretched canvas allows you to explore creative possibilities while honing your ability to interpret visual information. We all need to constantly remind ourselves what it is we’re naturally drawn to and what excites us visually—too often we become sidetracked by technique and forget the creative part of painting.” ■

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.