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Portraits: Capture Your
Subject's Personality

The Telling
GESTURE

It's the space between the picture-perfect moments that define the essence of a portrait subject.

By Alain Picard

As a portrait artist, I try to capture a subject's character in moments of honest expression and gesture. To capture that character and communicate the sensitivity of the human spirit, I've found that pastel is a wonderful tool. It can be soft and subtle or coarse and playful, varying in texture much like our emotions. What I love most about pastel is the immediacy it provides in recording my first impressions, like a visual shorthand that renders my perceptions with freshness.

Getting to Know You

I believe that my passion for people is the greatest asset I bring to my art. I begin each of my portraits by spending time with the subject, getting acquainted with her and discovering how best to portray her. I explain my intentions and try to draw her out. As she becomes "herself," I snap away with my camera from many angles, shooting right through the conversation and laughter, stealing the in-between moments along with the more staged shots. The idea is to try lots of variations in the hope that a few honest moments will present themselves.

This photo shoot is an extremely important stage in the creation of my work. I experiment with many different lighting setups, costumes and poses. I take a great deal of care in finding

Mood Lighting

For Radiance (pastel, 17x9½), the model sat indoors as warm afternoon light poured in from the window. The backward-tilting gaze and dramatic lighting provide a strong mood in this sensitive portrait.

Playing It Coy

Photo Synthesis

2
Sketching In

3
Building Up Value

4
A Soft Touch

5
Smudge and Blend

1 This is the primary reference I used from the initial photo shoot. A great image usually comes as a result of technical preparation and a happy accident. Capturing these moments on film is half the battle in achieving quality results in my portraits. I enlarged this image to 8x10. While I'll sometimes crop an image and recompose it at this stage, in this case I loved the full composition as it was.

2 Here I began to lay in a loose drawing with vine charcoal on gray La Carte pastel card. I was trying to get the general expression and gesture right in the initial drawing— for this is the most important aspect of this portrait. If I can't feel the expressive gesture right from the start, the piece will fail to communicate. I used the side of the charcoal stick as well as the tip to draw, constantly resharpening the tip with sandpaper.

3 Still working with the vine charcoal, I built up the value structure around the head, establishing all my dark areas. I then refined the features and developed the lower area. I was very sensitive to capturing the emotion and expression here, letting the movement of my charcoal marks support the overall gesture and attitude of the pose. In this case, notice the diagonal energy moving through the figure from top left to bottom right.

the best lighting conditions, as light is the key element in revealing the beauty of the moment. I'm a big fan of natural light and use it as often as I can.

As I review my photos, I look for those moments that really capture a gesture and expression that reveals my subject's true nature. When I settle on my final image, I make an 8x10 enlargement to use as my primary reference. The rest of the photos, along with my recollections, serve as the supportive reference to expand my understanding of the subject.

Before I begin any drawing, I spend some time deciding what my primary motive is for this piece. Is this painting about a unique gesture, in which body language will be emphasized? Or is it about that wonderful expression on her face? Whatever the case, having a definite vision gives purpose to every mark that will soon be laid on the paper. It also helps me determine what must be left out in order to strengthen the painting's communication. As

you can see above, a tremendous amount of work happens before pastel ever hits paper, ensuring a more unified and successful result.

Putting Pastel to Paper
I work on La Carte medium gray pastel card for most of my portraits. This surface allows for a rich, painterly buildup and coarse textural areas with excellent resilience to reworking. With a stick of vine charcoal in hand and a strong purpose in mind, I lay in a loose drawing. Then I build up the drawing using both the side of the charcoal and the tip sharpened with sandpaper. Accuracy is important at this stage, as every bit of information I apply directly affects the rest of the work. I must be able to "feel" the expression right from the start, or it will likely fail in communicating later.

Moving directly to soft pastels, I begin using the sides of broken pieces like a flat brush to block in color and tone. I work from dark to light, developing the shadow areas first and

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4 I began to lay color into the face and its surroundings using Schminke soft pastels along with other medium-soft selections. I used mostly the sides of broken pieces, like a flat-brush technique. I blocked in the darks with a very black pastel. I worked from the face to the hair and background and then back again, moving all over the piece. I grabbed colors at random for the background, letting my intuition soar in this area. I brought the background colors into the hair and face, too.

5 I developed the face with more pastel, smudging the pigment into the surface and blending it with the surrounding colors. I used paper towels, 3-inch bristle brushes, kneaded erasers and my fingers to unify shapes and tones. Still working with the piece as a whole, I kept developing the background with the hair and shoulders, now flirting with the drapery as well. I looked for overall color harmony and design as I worked on her features and details, doing lots more blending and smudging. I re-drew with vine charcoal when features got blurred, and also began to lay a few hard pastels over soft ones to blend and sharpen edges.

Trust Your Intuition

I let my intuitive mind soar while laying in color and texture for Johan *(pastel, 9x12½). The horizontal composition makes for an exciting and unusual design.*

6 I continued refining the face, mostly with soft pastels, trying to get an accurate skin tone. I also built up the background, getting a feel for its relationship to the figure. I worked more on the drapery and began to block in her arm.

7 The painting was well-developed now, with a strong sense of color relationships and tonal range. All that was left to do was put some icing on the cake with decorative details on the drapery, further tighten the facial features to capture the likeness and finish off her hand (without bringing attention to it, since it's not the focal point). I used hard pastels sharpened to a point to further develop the skin tones and details, hatching them right over the soft pastel. A bristle brush knocked out areas that got too heavy. This created harmony between the edges, colors and shapes.

8 I take a great deal of time to look in these final stages, considering the painting and asking myself: Is the gesture working? Can I feel the emotion through the expression on her face? Is there an overall color harmony? Does the design work? Are there any edges that need to be lost? Is the likeness convincing? When I could answer all these questions confidently, *Flirtation in Red* (pastel, 24x18) was done.

Room to Breathe

I love the relaxed, youthful attitude of Eve *(pastel, 19x13), frozen in an eternal exhale. She shared many stories with me as I snapped away at the photo shoot, finally capturing this revealing gesture on film.*

highlights last. I try to lay in accurate values right from the start so that less reworking will be necessary later. I develop the painting as a whole, moving all over the piece from my subject's face out to the background. I let my color decisions happen intuitively in the background, often grabbing colors at random. The intuitive mind is a powerful tool once the painting is underway, and I try to let things happen during this creative process. Once I've established the basic tonal and color relationships, I'll work in more soft pastels and then hard ones, if necessary, to refine details in the face and elsewhere.

I'm constantly evaluating my edges to see where I need to create hard edges or lose others, hoping to allow the eye to move smoothly over the painting. Often I'll take out an area with a large brush or paper towel if it's too static or competitive with my primary focus. When the elements of the painting combine to communicate my initial objective I make my escape, leaving as much of the initial vitality and expression as possible. Spontaneity and freshness are in danger of being edited out by too much refinement, so I'm very sensitive about retaining these qualities in the finished portrait. I spend much time "looking" in these final stages, asking myself whether there's color harmony, a strong design, a pleasing likeness and emotional power. If I can answer all these questions positively, I know I'm done.
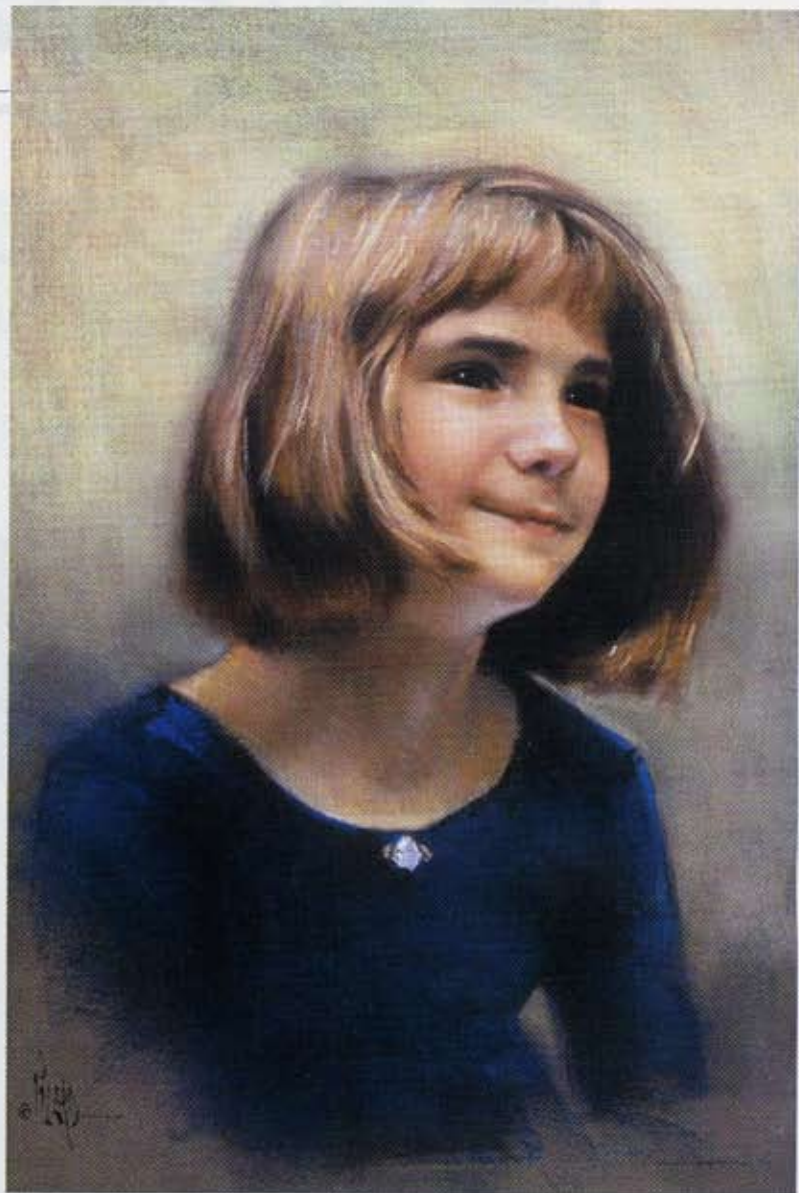
Connecting with the human spirit through portraiture is a true joy. The best assets you can bring to your portraits are a fascination for people and a passion to share that fascination with others through your art. ♦

About the Artist

ALAIN PICARD *(www.picardstudio.com) of Bethel, Connecticut, graduated from Western Connecticut State University with a bachelor of arts degree and also trained at the Art Students League in New York City. He's a signature member of the Connecticut Pastel Society and his work was honored as best in show at the 1999 and 2000 President's Show at the Kent Art Association. He's represented by the Gregory James Gallery in New Milford, Connecticut.*