

Nancy Depew strikes a balance between design and chance in her figure and flora paintings.

BY LOUISE B. HAFESH

back to the (high tech) garden



SOMETIMES GREAT CHANGE in an artist's work can come about by mere happenstance. No doubt, hard work, perseverance, training and talent play important roles in the development and expression of an individual voice. Still, a fortunate stroke of serendipity once in a while can make all the difference in moving that process along. Just ask New Jersey artist, Nancy Depew, who thrives on such possibilities.

Timing is Everything

In 2003, after working with the female nude for

many years, Depew took a hiatus from painting the figure. And while her work had been evolving from one painting to another, she began to feel the need to try something different. "I took what I thought would be a short break to clear my head," she recalls. "As it turned out, it would be the better part of a decade before I had a clear sense of how to continue with my figurative painting." In the interim, Depew would spend that time seriously pursuing landscape and floral compositions while experimenting with new and exciting ways to

utilize photography and computers in her work. Although she made several attempts to pick up where she'd left off in painting the figure, "Somehow," she explains, "the work never felt quite right; it never felt unforced."

Depew would eventually return to her figurative work with renewed zest, but the trigger to do so was a suggestion from Arcadia Fine Arts (now Arcadia Contemporary) gallery owner Steve Diamant. "Steve was encouraging me to think about the figure again and brought up the idea of combining it with flowers," says

ABOVE: Depew sketched the composition with vine charcoal and pencil on a gray toned ground for *Drift* (oil on canvas, 40x60). The figure is slightly larger than life size, as are the flowers. "It's a totally invented scene," says Depew, "and though I painted the forms to be three-dimensionally believable, I wasn't at all concerned with trying to achieve any sense of 'reality.' I focused on the interaction between the figure and the flowers and all the implications of that relationship. I relied on hundreds of photographs I'd taken and supplemented them with large doses of my own imagination."



LEFT: *Mercy* (oil on canvas, 40x40) is the third in the Flora and Figure series. "I switched to a new model and to a flower I've painted many times but never with the figure," says Depew. "The irises have very strong voices; I found a pose for the model that belonged with them."



OPPOSITE: *Better Now* (oil on canvas, 60x40) is the second painting in the Flora and Figure series that began with *Drift*. The pose was a variation of a pose Depew had explored years before. "It seemed the perfect fit when I decided to paint English roses, with which I took tremendous liberties," she says.

Depew. "The timing was perfect. An image materialized in my head before I even made it back to the studio. I had an overall sense of what the finished painting would look like, but the particulars were anything but clear. All I knew was that I couldn't wait to get it painted."

The resulting piece, *Drift* (pages 48–49), spawned a compelling signature series of flora and female nude compositions and a new direction for Depew, who having experimented with digital photography and gained computer savvy along the way, had amassed a treasury of reference images for inspiration. "When I finally did get back to doing the figure," says Depew, "technology, like any other tool, made it so much easier."

Adding High Tech to the Mix

Incorporating new media into Depew's process was instinctive. Her parents owned a photographic studio and, as a young artist, she remembers watching her mother working with transparent oils on black-and-white prints.

"My mom would set up a small table for me next to her desk where I could work alongside her," recalls Depew. "I was also introduced to all kinds of camera equipment and experimented with everything from Polaroid to digital." Despite growing up around cameras and learning to use them, the artist, who today admits to shooting thousands of photos for use in her paintings, is judicious about relying on them too heavily. "I've worked extensively both from life and various forms of photographic reference, including large format transparencies back before digital cameras came into their own," she says. "Nonetheless, I shoot only what I need in order to paint. After all, references are a starting point, not an end in themselves."

As for computers, another valued aid, Depew uses them to display photos as she paints, in the same way she would consult a sketch or a study. "I refer to the on-screen image for structural information," she points out, "but I interpret that information and

Insight in Progress

BY NANCY DEPEW



1

From Dark to Light

I allowed the first layer of paint to dry completely. I planned to work on the figure, while leaving the background untouched for the time being. Working from dark to light, I began to block in the second layer. The composition had been fairly well established in the first layer; now, I could concentrate on color while making minor anatomical adjustments.



2

Refining Color Transitions

Several hours later, I'd started working into the large areas of color I'd blocked in on the model's face, refining color transitions, paying attention to warm and cool color transitions and adding detail. The face was almost finished; the lilies were blocked in place. I left the rest for the next day.



3

Finishing the Figure

By the end of the next day I'd refined the detail in the hands and shoulders. I'd leave developing the shadow areas for the following day. The lilies and the rest of the background hadn't been developed beyond the first layer. After finishing most of the figure, I left it to dry and went into the background to develop the color there.



4

Amplifying the Background

It took several weeks to finish the final layers on the background and the rest of the figure in *Insight* (oil on canvas, 36x26). With the background finished, I felt as if I'd caught the emotional tone I was after, so it wasn't necessary to rework any of the flesh tones. If I hadn't been satisfied, I might have lightly sanded the image and reworked it.

make no attempt to be a photorealist." She doesn't do computer composites either, despite the impression that her figurative and floral paintings appear to be formalized in that way. Rather, she develops compositions envisioned in her mind's eye in real time.

Setting the Scene

Depew's studio, while designed to exacting standards, also encourages artistic expression. Annexed to her home, it's spacious and well organized. "I fill every square inch. If I had more room, I'd fill that too," she laughs. Divided into several work areas with windows facing north and northwest, the studio has track lighting for night sessions. The main painting sector houses a large computer monitor on one side of her easel, which is straddled

on the other by an oversized glass palette toned to midvalue gray. Other sections of the 700-square foot space include a mélange of computers, cameras, frames, plus a workbench with assembly and finishing equipment and multiple unfinished paintings in progress—giving the artist the freedom to address all facets at once or in stages.

Constructing From the Inside Out

Ensnared in this creative cocoon, Depew often works into the night. Her paintings tend to be constructions that, as often as not, get sanded down and put back together again. Whether working from life or photographs, her inclinations are to let things happen without getting in the way too much.

"I frequently work on multiple paintings

simultaneously," says Depew, who prefers to do her own varnishing (as well as build her own frames). "There are the practical considerations, like drying time for oil paints that make it better to have several works in progress. There are also conceptual issues that often arise in the course of making a work—issues that require reflection before I can proceed further. That often means that I'll set one piece aside and go on to another to switch my focus for a while. The paintings often seem to feed each other,

when the problems solved in one take me into the next."

Choosing subject matter that she connects with deeply, after selecting a pose, Depew follows her instincts to gauge the possibilities. "The best models I've worked with have a background in art of some sort," she says. "They get it. I might have a general idea of what I'm looking for—seated pose, back view, face seen or unseen—but I try to look without imposing ideas. It's a process of discovery. If I

NANCY DEPEW'S BASIC PALETTE:

titanium white

Scheveningen yellow

Scheveningen red

ultramarine blue

Supplemental colors:

Scheveningen green

alizarin crimson

Indian yellow-green lake extra



ABOVE: "I needed to stop painting the figure for awhile and found that florals filled the void for me," says Depew. "The large florals like *Lure* (oil on canvas, 40x60) have taken me in directions I never would have predicted."

am photographing a model, I don't try to get a perfect shot or compose a perfect setup, as I enjoy working out the compositional concerns directly on canvas."

She does that by working from the general to the specific, and citing how some 19th-century painters did studies to work out every detail before beginning a major work, she says, "My instincts tend toward a more modern approach. I happily start with a vague sense of where I'm going and work out the particulars on the canvas."

For Depew, that means looking for visual cues and homing in on a gesture that will give a basic idea of composition. From there, she either does a light sketch or draws directly with paint. Then, scrubbing in thin layers of darks and lights to block things in, she gets a sense of how the light will move through the painting. She explains: "Usually, I cover the whole canvas with the first layer; I don't worry much about the exact color. I'm more concerned with massing in the composition, playing with possible focal points and generally getting acquainted with the possibilities while contemplating the conceptual aspects of the painting. I paint freely knowing that everything will change in subsequent layers."

To that end, when the first paint layer

has completely dried and with a fresh eye to assess her progress, the artist will go back in and make corrections with vine charcoal before further developing any areas in paint. "When I do start to paint the second layer," she says, "I'm likely to pay attention to getting the color closer to where I want it. That can entail repainting in the darks and lights to get some semblance of the final value range or plugging in areas of color around a focal point so I know where I'm headed."

At this point, blocking in big areas and developing the forms, she gives herself leeway to play a little in order to get the most out of the work, technically and conceptually. "If I have plans for a dominant focal point, I might work that area to a degree of high detail and then build the rest of the painting around it. Sometimes, however, I pull the whole painting up at the same time, saving all the detail work for the final layers. My main concern in either case is to allow the painting process to move forward without restricting it with preconceptions—to respond honestly to the immediate needs of the situation."

Building up pigment in layers, which has the effect of giving her flesh tones and petals a beautiful translucent quality, Depew frequently scrapes areas off to repaint or to

Studio Practices & Processes

Old Holland oils are Depew's paints of choice; she sticks to a fairly restricted palette of primary colors plus white. From that base, with a few guest colors here and there, she can blend any other combination. "I take mixing very seriously," she says, "and use it as a way to learn everything I can about color."

Another thing she takes seriously is the issue of long-term exposure to painting materials, an issue that precipitously surfaced early in her career. As she tells it, she had been totally focused on painting when she accidentally managed to chug down a portion of a glass of turpentine. "Having learned the hard way, I now keep all drinks or food far away from my palette and avoid using pigments with heavy metals like lead, cobalt and cadmium. (She prefers Schevevengen primary colors for their low toxicity). I rarely use medium, and sometimes just a drop or two of linseed oil suffices if I need to balance out fat over lean problems. As for clean up, I use soap and water for everything, including my glass palette."

Describing art-making as "a process, an experience that leads to insight and revelation," Depew concludes: "I'm not interested in documenting reality. I make three-dimensionally believable images, but I never think of them as 'real.' I'm more interested in investigating the intuitive aspect of a subject, digging into the nature of experience. Making art is an adventure filled with perils and surprises," she admits. "I try to respond to the artwork as it forms, choosing options that will lead me toward learning the most I can from and about the work."

After all, there are thousands of options every time you pick up a brush. What will guide the decisions you make and what priorities will be revealed by those decisions? Those are the questions that fascinate me."

make compositional changes. "Sometimes the painting is completed in just a few layers," she says. "Other times the layers get worked and reworked until every question is resolved." ■

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Meet Nancy Depew

Nancy Depew began her formal education in painting at Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where she received a bachelor of arts degree. Her desire to pursue figurative work led her to graduate studies at the University of Albany, the State University of New York, and in 1985, she received a master of fine arts in painting there. The artist has been awarded painting fellowships from the Ludwig Vogelstein

Foundation and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Early in her career she held teaching positions at the Savannah College of Art and Design, the duCret School of Art and Monmouth University, and has presented a variety of lectures, not only on her own work, but on related topics, including gallery talks through the Docent Association of the Princeton University Art Museum. Depew's paintings and drawings have been exhibited widely and are collected internationally. She now paints full time in her hometown of Plainfield, NJ. Visit Depew's website at www.depewstudio.com.



ABOVE: "Artists have used flowers as subject matter for hundreds of years, yet it would be a terrible mistake to believe that their potential as a means of delving into the nature of human experience has been exhausted," says Depew. "As is evident in *Outburst* (oil on canvas, 40x40), I use the flower as a vehicle that provides me with a way for channeling something internal, fragile and elusive."