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Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden

Transkript: Roy Perkinson about his watercolors and pastel paintings on paper

geführt von Irene Brückle am 08.05.2023

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Informationen zum Interview

Projekt/Anlass	artemak+X / Sammeln von Informationen über das Werk und die Materialien von Roy Perkinson	
Anwesende Personen	Interview mit	Roy Perkinson (RP)
	geführt von	Irene Brückle (IB)
Ort	RP: Wellesley, Massachusetts, USA / IB: Stuttgart, Germany	
Datum und Uhrzeit	08.05.2023, CET 16:38 bis 17:55	
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	Dauer	76:55 min Aufnahme per „Zoom Meetings“
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	Verwendete Symbole	
	(…)	Pause ab 3 Sek.
	(Text)	Beschreibung Mimik und Gestik
	(unv.)	unverständlich
	[Text]	Ergänzung durch Roy Perkinson
	[[Text]]	Ergänzungen durch Irene Brückle aus schriftlichen Aussagen von R. Perkinson vom 15.11.2022
	//	Überschneidung von Sprecher:innen
	#00:00:00#	Zeitmarker

Roy Perkinson about his watercolors and pastel paintings on paper

IB: You get a notice now that the recording has started // #00:00:04#

RP: // Yes I can see this #00:00:08#

IB: And that we can indeed begin. So, I will just start and I will say that I would like to welcome you, Roy Perkinson, in this interview, which is conducted within the framework of artemak, which is the name of a project at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden – specifically the conservation branch or department of that university where conservators are educated and research is done. And they create artist interviews with a material technology focus that are also conducted by conservators. Thank you for agreeing to this interview, Roy – glad we can have this meeting today. // #00:01:00#

RP: // Yes #00:01:00#

IB: I also note that it is May 8, 2023 and we are recording this in Zoom as our videoconferencing tool. I am in Stuttgart, and Roy Perkinson where are you right now? #00:01:11#

RP: Where I live in Wellesley, Massachusetts, its W-e-l-l-e-s-l-e-y, Massachuessetts. **#00:01:23#**

IB: Great, we will write this down. // #00:01:25#

RP: // Not far from Wellesley College, actually. #00:01:30#

IB: Yes, that's right. So, Roy, we met many years ago, I try to remember, I think it was in the early 1990s, in Boston. And through our paper conservation colleague Christa Gaehde, who was in private practice in Arlington, close by. At that time, you were the head paper conservator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts // #00:01:52#

RP: // Mhm #00:01:53#

IB: You were renown for your work and research in the conservation profession. Today, however, you are an accomplished artist, working in pastel, oils, and watercolor. So you have switched from the conservation of art to the creation of art, which is a fascinating change of perspective, I think. You focus – as far as I know your work – on representational topics many of which feature landscapes and scenes of nature, catching a particular atmosphere and mood. You have exhibited in shows, you're represented in galleries in Massachusetts and Maine, and your works are held in public and private collections. So in this interview, I would like to focus on your works on paper, namely pastel and watercolor painting, which are each intricate [art] forms in their own right. And to start, you mention that [you were introduced to art] when you were quite young [because your father was an artist]. Could you tell us a little bit about your childhood experience? #00:02:54#

RP: Oh sure, in fact, this would allow me to just say that making art has been, as far back as I can remember, there as a part of my life, sometimes for various reasons mostly having to do with work, my profession; it has gotten submerged. But as I was looking over the interesting questions that you asked, I did find myself thinking it's not as if I sort of switched in some respects from being a conservator; it's just that those years in which I had a professional life have now come actually to an end, more or less, but the making of art has continued for throughout - for many, many years. When I was in San Francisco from 1973 to 76, when Jean and I and our boys moved there, it was to set up a

paper conservation facility. And during those years I think I scarcely did any art at all. It was just, things were just too complicated, too demanding, and I was just so wrapped up in the work I was doing there that it just seemed to push artmaking very far into the background. But before I went there and also after I got back it reemerged as something that – well, it's funny, it's just a kind of undeniable thing in my life which at times I wasn't willing to recognize, perhaps. Ironically in part because I know that my father was not keen on my being involved with making art at all because he was I think very bitter about his experience trying to make a living, trying to make it as an artist and he was unsuccessful. [[I recall that my dad often had a painting or two in progress in the house – he never had an actual studio – and consequently the aroma from linseed oil and turpentine were a common element of the air in our home.]] And the fact that I was also quite fond of science made him feel well that's the ticket, that's what you need to get into in order to make your way, and to perhaps support a family and all those things. But (laughs) anyway, I said it is ironic the way he was so against my getting involved with artmaking because, as you just said, one of my earliest memories with him and art together was when he took me as a young boy, perhaps [when I was about eight or nine] years old because I know the part of Dallas, Texas, where we were living, and we only lived there [after] I was about eight years old. And he took me out one day to a spot in downtown Dallas, Texas, that was on a levee, this huge embankment of dirt and earth, that rises up on either side of what's called Trinity River, and it's basically why Dallas is where it is, as in so many cases where cities have grown up around a river because of transportation. I think a similar thing must have happened in the history of Dallas itself. Anyway, he picked that location for whatever reason, and he gave me a set of [[beginners]] watercolors and some paper and brushes and so forth; and he was going to be painting his own picture and gave me these materials so I could engage in doing some painting with watercolors as well. [[The idea was that he would work on doing a watercolor painting himself, while I would see what it was like to use some watercolors. I was situated a dozen or so feet away from where he was working, so we settled in with our paints.]] Not that he ever felt inclined to give me much instruction, but just that this would be something I would enjoy doing. And, indeed, I did! And so we were there for some time, working way up high up on this levee overlooking the river and after a while it was lunch time, and so I remember that we then packed everything up, and he drove us down the road just a little way to this funny road-side shack, just a very humble kind of wooden building, where there were at least a couple of African-American folks who had opened a little drive-in chicken restaurant of sorts. In fact, you see, it's overstating it to call it a restaurant, it was really just a shack by the side of the road, but they made chicken there, fried chicken, and I can remember so clearly, getting that wonderful fried chicken, and they had these incredible donuts – no biscuits – that they made, and traditionally, you would accompany all this with the biscuits and some honey to put on the biscuits and some dill pickles [[on the side]]. [[Dad seemed to know about things like this. We got our food and sat down at a wooden picnic table nearby, and I dug into some of the best fried chicken I'd ever had.]] And so we sat there and had lunch. I continue to be amazed how clear that whole episode is in my memory. [[So I guess you could say that it was my first experience with "plein air" painting and with the watercolor medium, though that makes it sound very grand.]] But I think it is funny, it is ironic, that on the one hand he introduced me to this wonderful medium of watercolor, but at the same time, in later years, was very much upset about my getting involved with art. That happened not until I was in my junior year in college when I left for about a year and a half and went to a private art school, again in Dallas, and moved back home. And the man who ran the art school had been trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and he seemed to be quite pleased with the work I was doing and suggested that I might like to go to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and he said that he was fairly sure – given that he went there and he still knew a lot of the professors and so forth – that he might be able to get me into that Academy.

Well, I mentioned this to my mother and father who in the meantime had actually gotten divorced. But they came together on this issue, and it was like a little miniature atomic explosion in the family. And basically, my mother and father said that they insisted that I go back and finish up at MIT and then basically my father more or less said, well, then, whatever you do after that it is up to you; but he, they

were very keen on my continuing in the science field. And it made sense. Historically, at that time it was in the, sort of the aftermath of this so-called Sputnik era, with the Russian space shuttle, or, the satellite that had been launched, and, so there was a huge cry about getting into the scientific field. [[But to back up, even before going to college I remember a number of occasions when I was trying my hand at drawing and painting, mostly in high school. And I should add that I became quite fond of photography, and even became the one and only photographer for both the school newspaper and the high school annual. (Actually, that was so grueling that it actually ruined my love of photography for some time.]] #00:11:010#

IB: And eventually, in your academic education, you mentioned MIT or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and you went there and I think that was that for a bachelor's degree? #00:11:24#

RP: Yes, that's right, I got a Bachelor of Science Degree. #00:11:28#

IB: // When was that? #00:11:31#

RP: Well, I was in what was called the Class of '62, but I didn't actually graduate until it was about '63 or '64. But I switched my majors when I was there to do a dual major. Fortunately for me, MIT had begun to offer these dual majors in science and humanities. And, in fact, that had already gotten underway when I arrived there in 1958. The president addressed the incoming students and talked about how going forward, MIT was not just going to be a scientific or engineering institute but more of a university that was centered on science but where humanities were also given tremendous weight. #00:12:36#

IB: // Interesting #00:12:36#

RP: The feeling was that science cannot exist in a vacuum in society and that we must become more aware of how scientists and engineers must fit into the society at large and learn what the responsibilities are. So it was fortunate for me when I got back after that year-and-a-half or so in art school they offered some wonderful classes in philosophy and languages. I took a course in Italian and in Russian, but the philosophy courses were my favorite. There was a professor named Irving Singer. Irving Singer was an extraordinary man, many years later I heard him give a lecture in Cambridge, MA, at a bookstore there where he was invited to speak on one of his then current interests, which was the philosophical underpinnings of some contemporary filmmakers. And he spoke for almost an hour and a half, and you could have recorded it and just printed what he said as a book (laughs). He was amazing! And after the lecture I came up and just reintroduced myself as one of his former students and I noticed that his notecard was nothing but a simple three by five notecard that he referred to once in a while in this hour-and-a-half long lecture. He was an amazing man (laughs). I was delighted, in fact, to hear him speak again. #00:14:37#

IB: And did that then lead to your – the philosophy at MIT – did that lead you to art history at Boston University? #00:14:47#

RP: Well, to some extent, I'd say. While I was finishing – well after I finished at MIT, I worked for a while for what was then called the Instrumentation Laboratory which was affiliated with MIT and is now called Draper Labs. But while I was working there, I was also taking evening classes at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in things like printmaking, sculpture, and anatomy [[a terrific class on anatomical drawing]], and so forth, it was really quite a terrific place and very easy to get there. In fact, I think I continued with some of those evening classes even after I eventually started working at the Museum of Fine Arts. I guess, the thing about that was, well, working at the Instrumentation Laboratory in the daytime and going to art school in the evening seemed always to surprise people I

was working with during the day. They thought this was really quite bizarre, and the people who were there in the evening classes at the art school also would ask – they were surprised: “You do what during the day time?” We were working on missile guiding systems, it was related to the Gemini project. (laughs) So I began to think of myself as a relatively mild-mannered and relatively harmless schizophrenic of sorts. (laughs) [[And when I could carve out time, and having the benefit of a very understanding wife, I would sporadically go out painting on site in various places.]] And that continued for a while because when I did move over eventually into art history at Boston University, I also had a part-time job at the Museum of Science doing lectures and doing things that sometimes were not very enjoyable like demonstrating a six-foot long python which I had to drape around my shoulders and neck in front of the crowds there. (chuckles) But – it was – you know, interesting. I ran a program for high school students, called “The Science Explorers”, trying to get them interested in aspects of science and so forth. But again, my art-historical colleagues at Boston University were quite puzzled that I should be working there doing that. (chuckles) #00:17:37#

IB: Well, isn’t that somehow a bit of a preparation for conservation too and for this kind of odd mixture of technical, historical, aesthetic interests one has in this profession, scientific interest, that all come together. It seems like you had a very broad preparation for your future profession in that way. #00:18:02#

RP: Very much so. But I could see that in retrospect, only in retrospect. At the time it was not clear to me that that was going to be the outcome of any of it. There was a period when I naturally thought about how I was rather sad that I thought I had wasted all that money that my parents had spent on me for my college education. But then, eventually, I may have told you this story, I met a man at the Museum of Fine Arts who had, around 1929, started what became the paper conservation laboratory at the Museum of Fine Arts. And his name was Frank Dolloff. And I had given him a brief letter at one time, hoping I could find a job one summer. Well, at that time there were no jobs to be had there nor any other places either, it seems, but fortunately, Frank was a bit of a pack rat, he kept all sorts of things, and one day my letter emerged from beneath various things and he contacted me and asked me to come for an interview, because in the meantime, he had spoken to the director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Perry Rathbone, and had begun to think about what’s going to happen after he retires. And he wanted very much to train someone to be able to continue on what he had been doing. And so Perry had given him money to hire someone and so he called me in and we talked for a while in one of the galleries there, there is one of these funny old large round seating benches there in the gallery. And I remember him just standing there and talking to me about what he does, and he said, basically: “Look at you, Roy, you’ve got the perfect background for this.” He said: “When I got into the field of paper conservation, all you needed was a love of art, a willingness to learn, especially learn from your mistakes, an ability to be curious about how to solve problems. In the future, though”, he said “that’s not going to be enough.” He said I have the perfect background, a background in science, art history, studio art. And it didn’t really click with me at that time, I said that sounds good, and I’m glad to know these things can be useful in some way. But, in later years I realized that was a remarkable thing for him to have said especially because he was very much a self-made man. He learned the hard way just on his own, reading, but also just trying to make his way. And there few books, there was a book that one of the collectors associated with the Museum of Fine Arts had given him, and it was by Bonnardot. Frank didn’t read French, but there were certain parts of it that he had translated and which gave him some ideas that he tried to put in practice in the paper conservation lab. And so it was fortuitous that all of this came together. It was one of those funny things, Irene, where you realize sometimes your life can turn on a little tiny pivot, if you don’t know that suddenly you’re going to be on a different path that you could never ever have anticipated. #00:22:24#

IB: // Ja, that seems like. #00:22:25#

RP: //Several things, ja. #00:22:26#

IB: I think that is really such an interesting story, you know, when you can go back within, one additional generation all the way from Dolloff to the nineteenth century, to Bonnardot, which is mid-nineteenth-century, that's quite astounding. But, you know, we're having now a totally fascinating discussion about actually the history of conservation and especially, of course, your biography, which is unusual also, but maybe that's also a moment where we can return to making art because becoming an artist, the same question applies, how did you really learn about materials and techniques, there were special moments or people whom you connected with. Can you tell us a little about that? #00:23:24#

RP: Oh, of course, yes. I think, I remember many times in my old days in high school and junior high school when I would be drawing, and not so much painting early on, but I was doing drawing, anyway, and did get involved to some extent with oil painting. My father continued [painting], even though he was frustrated about not having a career as a fine artist. He worked as a draughtsman at a company in Dallas, the Mobile Oil Company. He was involved in the cartographic section there. They were doing map-making. But he also continued to paint, I remember him painting portraits of my mother in oil. So, it was not unusual to have this aroma of oil paint and turpentine, of course, in the house. So, it seemed quite natural to try to continue doing this. As far as drawing is concerned, I remember being absolutely fascinated with some of the covers on books of science fiction which I enjoyed reading. The covers of many of the paperback editions of science fiction in those days had illustrations that were actually, I realized later on, were based on influences from the surrealism period – things that were somewhat reminiscent of the work of de Chirico, for example. I have always kind of enjoyed those compositions. I think they so often represent objects abstracted from nature and standing in a space where there might be light and long shadows being cast by those objects. Well, I realized many, many years later that that's one of the things I'm kind of attracted to as a feature in my own art, in my own landscapes. But even though as I say I continue working in art materials at high school it wasn't really until I dropped out of MIT for a year and a half and went to an actual art school that I got seven-league boots on and made great strides in understanding something about the materials and techniques. [[While at MIT in my Junior year, I began to feel that I no longer knew why I was there. So, I requested and was granted a leave of absence. I returned to Dallas, and lived for a short time with my mother and step-father, and signed up for art classes at a private art school near downtown Dallas, Texas, run by Chapman Kelley, an ex-Texan who had graduated from the prestigious Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest museum and art school in the United States. For a while, I bunked in a room at the picture framer's shop in the same building as where Kelley taught his classes. The framer, Dick Fox, hired me, and I learned so much from him, especially hand-carving of frames, and how to do silver and gold leafing. (I also learned how to make a proper omelet, and other culinary matters.) An amazing and memorable experience! Subsequently, for a short while I took a room on the second floor of an antique shop, near the art school. Later, I moved to a rooming house run by "Mother Ashley," who was fair but stern and didn't brook any misbehavior by the residents. For 1 dollar a day(!), I got a room, breakfast, dinner, and, if she liked you, a bag lunch. Meanwhile, I continued to take classes in life drawing and painting, at Kelley's "atelier," and worked with Mr. Fox making frames.]] [[I was introduced to so many art materials!]] [[Of course, we did some of the basics of figure drawing which was just fascinating. Some of them, like charcoal, various graphite pencils, etc. were already quite familiar having used them from an early age. But learning about all the other drawing materials such as the amazing range of Conté crayons was really wonderful. And simply having the time to use them over and over, day after day, was great.]] Of course we did some of the basics of figure drawing, which was just fascinating, but also the whole process of making your own canvases [[Belgian linen canvas]], stretching them, applying sizing to the linen canvas. The teacher then, the fellow who ran the art school, Chapman Kelley, taught us how to make his favorite type of ground, I think it's called an oil emulsion ground and with calcium carbonate in it, Venice turpentine and rabbit skin glue, it was quite a

mixture of things which all had to be kind of compounded and applied while it was still wet to the canvas. [[I can still almost summon up the distinctive aroma of that! How to insure that the wooden stretcher is indeed quite square, how to secure it in place, and of course, the process of cooking rabbit skin glue for sizing! Talk about "aromas"! How to determine what the viscosity of the size should be, how to apply it effectively and uniformly – all this just seemed enthralling to me. Also, how to make sure that the canvas hadn't been stretched too tightly so it wouldn't warp after the sizing had been applied – very important.]] And it makes a wonderful surface to paint on. I've also realized later on that it is sometimes subject to cracking so it's actually not a very sound way to make a painting ground. (chuckles) You're better off using white lead, lead white paint as a basic ground on top of the sizing. [[I've now been using the PVA sizing agents, and the ground I like, from Gamblin Colors, is made from titanium dioxide and calcium carbonate, rather than the toxic lead carbonate.]] But that's when I really got involved with some of these materials. And at that same time, in fact, I had a job learning how to make frames with a man who did all the framing for the art instructor Chapman Kelley. He would show me not only how to carve wooden frames but also taught me how to do gilding with silver leaf and gold leaf and that was absolutely fascinating. I mean it is something just utterly miraculous about gold leaf and silver leaf, especially gold leaf. And he pointed out when I was just learning all this that you could hold a flashlight up behind a sheet of gold leaf and see the light coming through the gold leaf. And it's just jaw dropping (laughs) it's really astounding. #00:28:45#

IB: Yes, a special material definitely, once it is applied it looks like solid gold. #00:28:50#

RP: Yes, yeah (laughs) #00:28:54#

IB: So I would like to turn to your pastel paintings. They are really a significant part of your work. I remember seeing the first of your paintings actually at Christa Gaehde's home // #00:29:07#

RP: // Oh, yes. // #00:29:09#

IB: // She had one of your larger pieces. So can you tell us a little bit about your pastel painting technique? #00:29:20#

RP: Well first time that I ever really tried working with pastel was because I wanted to make use of something that was portable and quick and very straightforward to use. All you need is pastels and paper. You don't even need water, ordinarily. And I ran across a small pastel that I did when my wife and our two sons were on vacation up in Nova Scotia, along the coast where there were these amazing outcrops of rocks almost like the outcroppings of rocks along the coast that Monet was so drawn to.
[[Given the small window of time I had with managing my household duties (by then we had two wonderful sons), I was able in the 1970s to drive short distances to locales I found attractive, places I had probably glimpsed in driving to various places around the Boston area, such as along the banks of the Charles River, the Great Meadows Wildlife Refuge, or just in the neighborhood near our home. Also, I found out about a printmaking workshop in Boston where, for very little money, you could rent time to use their intaglio presses, and, inspired by the great exhibition (1968) at the Fogg Art Museum by Eugenia Janis on the monotypes of Degas, I began doing monotypes which I would take home and rework with pastels. A really enticing combination of media!]]
The materials I was using then actually were not what I think of as proper pastel but were called NuPastel – N-u-P-a-s-t-e-l[1] – which is a kind of brand of chalk but they are not as powdery and so they were perfect for taking along with one's family on a vacation. And I enjoyed – there was something about their working properties, they were very smooth and had a kind of unctuous feeling to them. They were not very susceptible or amenable to being smudged around and moved or worked with a brush or anything like that the way proper pastels are. But that's really I think when I first got involved

with doing those. But it was only a small step from using Conté crayons in the art school which of course is often the traditional medium for doing figure drawings – from there to using NuPastel, and from there eventually getting myself equipped with proper pastels. The first pastels I began using were Rembrandt Pastels[2], and this is I guess where the conservation aspect of all this comes in. Which is to say that one of the things I liked about Rembrandt Pastels was that they rank all of their pastels according to how fugitive they are when exposed to light. [[I liked their openness about the color stability of their products.]] So you could make an intelligent choice among them and stay away from those that fade very quickly and use just those that show good durability with exposure to light. #00:32:24#

IB: Yes. These kinds of pastels – the Rembrandt Pastels – are from one manufacturer. Have you looked in the meantime at other kinds of pastels? #00:32:42#

RP: Oh yes. In fact, Schmincke pastels have some wonderful working properties. [[Rembrandt pastels are comparatively hard, and for the past twenty years or so I often migrate toward Schmincke, Sennelier, Unison, and Diane Townsend.]] There's an interesting website of a supplier of all things pastel: papers, fixatives, pastels themselves, and so forth. It's called Dakota Pastels[3], D-a-k-o-t-a, [[a vendor of all sorts of materials relating to pastel painting]] and one of the pages on their website, they rank pastels according to how hard or soft they are. And the list is huge – I mean, it just gives you an idea of how many pastel makers there are these days. And it's a very handy reference to seeing what the differences are between one pastel maker and another. Although having said that, there's a difference even within one pastel maker with how hard or soft pastels are because every pigment or pigment mixture in the case of pastels has its own requirement, if you will, for how much binder it needs, and as with – say – watercolor, some of the dark pigments, black pigments for example, require a lot more binder than other kinds of pigments. So, there are variations within each make // #00:34:21#

IB: // Would you mix between different makers to achieve // #00:34:25#

RP: // Oh, sure. Yeah. // #00:34:26#

IB: // You do // #00:34:27#

RP: Yes, all the time. Some makers like to make larger sticks, some make much thinner pastels, and, so, depending on what kind of stroke you're planning to make you can choose from different sizes. [[But as important as the softness/hardness of a pastel is whether the maker provides credible information about their light fastness. Although manufacturers of watercolors and oils have provided this information for decades (especially Winsor-Newton, for their watercolors), pastels have sometimes been like the "wild West," where you're on your own, with no guarantees. (Years ago, Robert Feller, the great scientist who was at the Carnegie Mellon University, wrote a really useful short article on a method anyone can use to assess light fastness. He focused specifically on felt tip pens, but this method can be used to assess virtually anything: papers, inks, watercolors, and pastels. I've shared this information with many artists and even used it in a class I once taught at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.]] #00:34:55#

IB: And, every pastel needs a support and supports are, well, not as complicated as the colors, probably, or the colorants but, historically people have used velvety parchment, they've used paper embedded with wool fragments in the cellulose matrix, or even sandpaper has been used, so there's so much choice today, I think. What are your favorites, do you have any that you like to use as supports? #00:35:28#

RP: Well, for quite a long time I just used various kinds of heavy drawing papers – Arches drawing papers – things like that. [[I have used, as you suggest, almost any paper or board that had enough texture or "tooth" to be an effective surface. I've also used acrylic coatings made for the purpose of making a surface that is receptive to pastel. These days, I benefit from the increased market for pastel-related products, and have used Wallace pastel papers, though these are no longer available. I've become quite fond of "Art Spectrum Colourfix" papers, and have taken those to a local firm that can mount them onto a rigid support, since I now mostly prefer working on a support that is tantamount to a panel.]] But now my preferred support is one called UART, it's this type of sanded paper. Mary Cassatt actually used paper that was very much like this. For a long time, people didn't make it, there were no makers for these kinds of things, but I think probably, I haven't looked historically, but probably since the 1980s, some manufacturer began to realize that there is a market for these kinds of paper surfaces and there have been several different makers. But UART I think is one that I really like a lot and you can get them in different grits just like sandpaper. [[They offer their papers mounted on both 4-ply and 8-ply acid-free board, but I find that they don't have quite enough dimensionally stability, compared to the "panels" I have made. (This becomes important when framing larger sizes, say 18X24, which might warp a bit more.)]] And so I like the UART 400 grit paper and it comes in different colors; not a huge range, but in some ways I think the color of the support can be interesting and sometimes useful but often, by the time I'm done, I have covered up most of it anyway.

[[Mostly I begin with a few light touches of a pastel "pencil" (I use Faber-Castell or Stabilo), and often the color at this stage isn't critically important because those strokes will either get incorporated or simply add color dimensions to what comes later – and psychologically it's freeing and exciting to begin using color immediately – not to allow myself to be overly precious or restricted. This stage is important though, because it's about beginning to define the underpinnings, the underlying structure of the composition. And again, composition is terribly important – it needs to support and enhance the visual "message" I'm trying to communicate. The basic composition needs to work from the very beginning. If it doesn't, no amount of fiddling or refinement later will rescue it – the painting could fail.]]

And, in fact, when I first start working on a pastel, virtually the first thing I do is to apply a lot of pastel that I will think of as not a ground layer in the proper sense but a kind of an initial layer of color, and just using pastel broadly across the entire surface or even just in certain areas to give a kind of initial inkling as to what the composition is going to be. And then I use a bristle brush – about a number 10 or 12 bristle brush – with isopropyl alcohol, which in effect somewhat dissolves the pastel, turns it almost into a kind of watercolor; and you can brush it back and forth and embed the pastel color into that sanded paper and it becomes a wonderful kind of background and you can use – you can allow some of that color that you have applied initially to come through your final composition. [[To a great extent, these color washes also more or less conceal the color of whatever pastel support I've used, so the initial specific color of that support is almost irrelevant, but often I select the color of that support with the intention of allowing it to remain at least somewhat visible.]] Sometimes a contrasting color to what has come on top of it. I continue sometimes even during the process of making a picture to resort to either spraying some of that alcohol on a certain area or dipping a brush in the alcohol and turn the pastel more into a kind of – temporarily, briefly – watercolor-like medium. #00:39:00#

IB: // Interesting. #00:39:01#

RP: There is something that Degas did, too. There is a wonderful pastel of some dancers seated on a bench at the Museum of Fine Arts [Boston], and since I had the privilege of being able to unframe these wonderful pastels when I worked there and looking at them very, very closely, one day I discovered that there were certain areas of brown color that were used by Degas in outlining or defining the edge of the bench and I looked at that brown – it sort of looked like milk-chocolate in

color – and when I looked at it under the microscope, though, I could see it contained an amazing galaxy of different kinds of pigment colors. And upon reading more about this I learned that he would sometimes grind up used pastels and mix them into what I think he called a kind of pastel soap. I'm not quite sure why that word might have been used, but a kind of paint, in effect. And then he could use that almost like gouache to paint certain areas with this rather opaque mixture. So there's precedent for using a liquid medium in conjunction with manipulating of a pastel painting. #00:40:37#

IB: That is really interesting. And because gouache of course has more binder and is not as powdery as a pastel, I think it also begs the question whether this has not a bit of a function of a better fixed paint layer. And that brings us to the question whether you also use fixatives in your work? #00:41:00#

RP: Absolutely, absolutely. I've been an ardent supporter of the idea, for a long, long time. The fixative that I used to use mostly was something made by an old paint and art material manufacturer in Philadelphia, the Weber Company. And they make something, at least used to make something called the "Blue Label Fixative". And I started using it just to try see how it would work. I had previously tried something made by Borden Chemical Company called, it's a whole line of paints under the name of Krylon, and under the name Krylon they make something that's labeled "artists' fixative". But I was not keen on this because it seemed to quickly, really impregnate – not fix but impregnate – the pastel just with too much of a binder. And as, again, because I had the privilege of working where I did at the Museum of Fine Arts, and given that they had a wonderful scientific research laboratory there, I did a kind of project one time to buy a number of pastel fixatives that were out on the market. And the scientist kindly used his technology to identify the basic ingredients, the resins that were used in those. And I was fascinated to see that the Krylon Fine Art Fixative was made from cellulose nitrate, which is a notably unstable kind of resin. And I actually called the Borden Chemical Company to see if I could talk to somebody about this. Eventually, I got transferred through to somebody who was said to be at the chemical end of the company, and I told him that I had found that the resin in that artists' fixative was cellulose nitrate and he said: "Yes, that's correct." I said: "But you know that that's not a very stable material." And he said: "Oh yeah, but we haven't gotten any complaints so far." (laughs) So, well, there we have it, you know, they continue to make that. But I found that the Weber Blue Label Fixative, which I also tested at the time, was compounded on an acrylic resin, which would presumably last much longer. I mean not that one uses a huge quantity of fixative anyway, so it's not as if you're making something – even if you used a cellulose nitrate fixative, that would have as much resin there as perhaps the old nitrate films, which of course are notably unstable. But still, it bothered me and, in fact, when I was talking to that chemist at Borden, I said: "But you know, you labeled this as an artist fixative and yet you're saying that permanence is not an issue." And he said: "Well, yes, and, again, nobody has complained about it." So, anyway, that led me to use Weber Blue Label Fixative for many years. That has become harder to obtain and meantime, another fixative which I'm very keen on is made under the name of Lascaux – which is like Lascaux caves. But I do think, as a practical matter, it is really important – I think I recommend, that any artist working pastel use a fixative. The inevitable complaint when somebody first tries using a pastel fixative is that it changes the color – well, yes, but as Robert Feller pointed out in his wonderful work into research of artist materials, it has to do with what's called the pigment-volume ratio, and if you keep adding more and more binder to an agglomerate of pigments, it will indeed change their color – apparent color – not the actual color of the pigment but the apparent color, because you can change the refractive index of what is around the pigments. And so I don't suggest that one should use fixative in huge quantities, but I find practically speaking that just a few passes of the pastel fixative usually are sufficient to help things stay put. How do you know this, well, after I've completed a painting – it's funny thinking I take off my conservator hat – and I take this pastel painting which is generally on a kind of panel with the UART 400 grit paper mounted on top, and I will take that after finishing it, and actually put it on a hard surface and tap the painting edge on the edge of this hard surface a few times, and you could see right away some pastel

will come off, but not so that you would know any difference in the way that the pastel painting looks. And then, at that point, I start applying the fixative, and, in fact after a while and once that dries, I would tap the picture again, you can see if you've done it properly or sufficiently, no more pastel comes off. That's what I'm after. #00:47:41#

IB: Yes, I think that makes good sense. I wonder, concerning the fact that pastel always tends to, some particles tend to fall down the vertical face of the surface, there were in former times in frames, there would be below the visible edge of the frame a little cavity for all the pigments that would come down that would show at the bottom edge of the frame piling up, so they made a kind of well to fall into, which is kind of interesting. But one more question // #00:48:18#

RP: // I think, to me Ii's kind of an indication that whoever the pastel maker was, the artist, did not take care to fix the pastel properly. I don't like that look, actually, I don't like it looking that deep in the frame. In fact, usually, my pastels are held away from the glass by only a very narrow, 1/16th or at most 1/8th of an inch with a mat, or none at all. In fact, I sometimes use these spacers made by a company called FrameTek[4]. You can buy the extruded plastic spacers, the one I like to use is shaped in cross-section like an S, and you clip that over the edge of the glass, and it creates a space between the glass and the pastel itself, which you could then put into a frame with no mat whatsoever. #00:49:38#

IB: Yes, we have some similar ones here. Returning once more to the fixative, do you also fix in between, you know like before you finish with the painting? #00:49:52#

RP: Oh yes, in fact, as a practical matter, some pastels can, after you've worked them heavily on an area of the picture, they can actually form a kind of hard surface. I think some of the red pastels, for example, I have found, can compact and become a surface that is then very difficult to apply more pastel to. But, if you spray those areas with some fixative, it seems to kind of reopen the surface of that area so you can apply more pastel on top of that area. #00:50:42#

IB: Interesting. Without loosening yet lower-lying areas, so it is not like you are breaking into the painting. #00:50:54#

RP: // And in fact, if for any reason, one sees a change of color or darkness or brightness of the pastel, I sort of feel, well, you're still the artist, you could add more pastel, if you see some change you don't like, correct it. (chuckles) #00:51:18#

[[IB: Where do you like to work in pastel?

RP: For a number of years, I would take them with me to various site to work on location, such as I mentioned above. But I've now become fond of working with them in my studio, as it's possible to focus on the work without the distractions – however pleasant or annoying – of working out of doors. Also, as the technology of photography has advanced, I have developed techniques for using reference photos I have made myself (never someone else's photos!) while avoiding the pitfalls of using photographs. They can be constricting and dictatorial, if you don't know what you're doing. I view them on a large-screen iMac computer, but here again that can be a slippery slope – it looks so convincing visually that it can lure you into simply trying to copy what you see on the screen! Mostly I extract what I call "structural information" from a photo – figuring out how to transform what is in the photo into ideas for composing where things will go.]]

IB: True. Now, I think we have heard quite a lot about pastels, and I would like to turn a little bit to watercolors. I think watercolors are just as special and complicated for other reasons. Would you like

to say a few words about your technique there and about the colorants you like to use? #00:51:43#

RP: Sure, well, goodness. (…) [[I've always loved it, thanks to my father. There are several things I enjoy about working in watercolor.]] I use – in some ways I guess you could say that I use nothing very special in terms of the range of color, but I have a full palette that I always use if I am working with watercolor – probably about 12 different watercolors. [[My standbys are Winsor Newton, but I also like some of Daniel Smith's line of watercolors. Together they seem to fill my needs.]] And one of the things I would like to say about watercolor and pigments, I would propose that ardent watercolorists are much more aware of the nature of their pigments than people who work in pastel or even in oil. Some oil painters I'm sure would disagree a little bit about this. But the fact is that I think the individual character or personality – if I may – of pigments in watercolor – are so much more a feature of how one works and how you have to really understand so much about them, how opaque they are, how transparent or moderately transparent they are, how they color or tint other pigments when you mix the watercolors together. You must be much more intimately familiar, I think, with your watercolor paints and how they behave, what their personalities are than with other materials. And I think one of the things I believe in your questions that you sent me some time ago was an interesting question about why would one want to shift from one medium to another. And I have noticed in my own work that there are times when I feel a yearning for the kind of mind-stretching effort that one must engage in when you are working in watercolor, especially after you've been working in oil or pastel because with the latter two, oil or pastel, often you are working from some of the darker pigments to the lighter pigments. In watercolors, you well know, you will have to turn your head upside down and think in reverse: what is going to remain light, and work toward the dark colors. And those get applied much later in the whole process of making a watercolor painting. [[After all, you can't really make a dark watercolor a light color after it's been applied, unless of course you erase it, scrape it out, or rewet it and lift as much color off the paper as you want.]] But I also feel every now and then this yen (unv.) to just enjoy the fluidity of watercolor. It's just entrancing. You know, it has a way of showing its personality just by the way it flows and moves and it depends on the wet the paper is, on how much water you've used in the mixture of your watercolors. So many variables come into play, it's like a tight wire act sometimes, I think – just trying to get the timing right.
[[As John Singer Sargent once said, "Painting in watercolor is making the best of an emergency." In this sense, I love that making a watercolor is engaging with a temporal medium – time is of the essence. How long to wait before applying the next touch of color? Now? no, wait ten minutes! Is the last wash still too wet? And of course trying to insure that the next stroke is not too wet and not too dry – it's like walking on a tight rope! Painters in oil or pastel never really experience this.]]
Did I ever tell you the story about my working one time at an artist retreat on Great Spruce Head Island off the coast of Maine? Well, I had this large watercolor block and set up my easel to look out over Penobscot Bay (in Maine), and it was getting late in the afternoon and I began working on this picture. And it had gotten to the point where I wanted the watercolor I had just applied especially some of the areas in the sky to dry sufficiently so that I could then apply some slightly darker colors, to represent some of the islands that I could see off in the distance. If you just very lightly touch the paper that you've just painted on you could see it was still kind of wet, and so it was not time to apply the next layer or strokes of watercolor. In fact, I've said, just as an aside here, that I think watercolor is kind of a temporal medium. You're existing in time, timing is very much a part of the whole thing, like a high wire act. You have to do everything just at the proper time. The paper can't be too wet or too dry to do what you want to do, you really feel the flow of time as you are working with this medium. Anyway, the paper would just not dry, and I suddenly realized, well of course, here I am on an island, I'm surrounded by the ocean, and it's probably rather humid, so the paper is simply not drying! Well, I thought, I've got to figure out what to do. I stood up with my watercolor block, an 18 by 24 inch size paper, so pretty large, and I held it up to see if I could catch some of the late afternoon sun on it to see if that would help it dry. It still was not drying very well. So I raised my watercolor block and started waving it quickly up and down in such a way that it might dry more quickly. Well, suddenly as I was doing this, I heard a

voice way down the hill from someone I hadn't even realized was there, another artist who was at this retreat, calling up to me: "Roy, Roy, are you okay?" (laughs) I called back: "Yes I'm fine." And I sat back and realized that it was going to be impossible to continue with the watercolor right then and that I would just have to wait until tomorrow to continue working on it. Which I did. But that evening over dinner – we had this communal dinner with other artists at this retreat – she came up to me, the woman who had been calling out to me – I wasn't even sure who it was – and she said: "That was me calling up to you to you to see if you were okay. I thought maybe you were being attacked by hornets or wasps or something like that." (laughs) Anyway, the next day in the afternoon I got back up to that same spot and continued on with the same picture and was able finally to complete it. But, anyway, it is one of the aspects of watercolor painting that I think is quite fascinating. And, as I said, every now and then I feel this desire to once again not only turn my thinking upside down regarding what colors get applied first and last and so forth but also just this feeling of being engaged in a temporal medium. #01:00:03#

IB: I think watercolor is very special like that. You know, I've read that people use all sorts of tricks, from oxgall which is historical to the hairdryer which is not historical, // #01:00:14#

RP: //Yes // #01:00:15#

IB: // so, have you used aids like that in working with watercolors? #01:00:20#

RP: Oh sure, in the studio, when I'm working on watercolor in the studio I have that advantage of using a hairdryer. That's something I didn't even think about until years ago, when I had the opportunity of working with a master watercolorist, an artist I'm still in touch with whose work is just terrific, and he introduced that idea to me, and it can be a great tool. #01:00:55#

IB: If one doesn't want to wait until the next step, but you can't take it out into the wild unless you have one with a battery. #01:01:02#

RP: That's right, you'd need a battery. (laughs) #01:01:07#

IB: So one last question about watercolor. I would like to know whether you – what kind of papers you use, because it is the white paper that is essential. You said that you have to work from light to dark, and that's of course one of the complicated things with watercolor that the paper plays such a big role in the appearance. #01:01:00#

RP: Oh yes. Well, like Turner said to a young student who came to see him one time: "Above all, young man, you must respect your paper." Very good advice. Hard to put into practice, perhaps. But I think like all people who love watercolor, I have a great interest in what kind of paper they're using because it can make such a huge difference in how one works, what the effect is. I've tried quite a few kinds of different watercolor papers. I continue to come back to "Arches Cold Pressed" paper as the one I find gives me the kind of control and effects I like most of all. But you know it's not a traditional watercolor paper in that it is not sized with a surface sizing of gelatin. Twin Rocker, a handmade paper company in the United States, does actually offer a watercolor paper that is made with traditional gelatin sizing. But there are a number of other papers that have come on the market in the last few decades, too. One out of India called Khadi[5], spelled k-h-a-d-i, is a really interesting paper, it is quite different from any of the other watercolor papers I have tried. Once you start using it, you know it can, it has its own way of interacting, and you just – like your pigments – you have to get to know what its personality is, and respect that, and then be willing to work with it, or not. There're certain watercolor papers that make you want to work, or that seem to require you to work, it doesn't feel comfortable to me. But Fabriano makes great watercolor papers as well. #01:03:58#

IB: And do you use – I mean, you've mentioned cold pressed and so on – there are different surfaces and properties, and when you plan for watercolor or certain motifs you want to paint, do you then decide also on which kind of paper fits that, or with the different paper choices? #01:04:23#

RP: Yes, sometimes I do. I know, I had the wonderful and enjoyable opportunity some years back to spend time in Italy in Tuscany and brought along some papers that I hadn't really used much before, but which I found really worked quite well to capture some of that marvelous light and atmospherics that I found in September in Tuscany. I sometimes think I just would love to go back (laughs) and be there with those papers in that light and atmosphere again, there is something quite magical about it. #01:05:15#

IB: Yes, I can imagine. Now there is – I think this has been a very rich look at the very different materials. I think there could much more said but I do think that we have to come to a close. But there is one quote that – looking at your website, there are quotes by different artists – and there are two quotes actually, you refer to Winslow Homer's artwork, his watercolors I mean, and there is a quote by Degas that you also seem to be very fond of, and I don't know whether you would like to comment on that, and I could read it to you – you might know it by heart, but I have it here in front of me, and you said that this is a statement by Edgar Degas: "Painting is not very difficult when you don't know how, but when you know, oh, then it is another matter." So it seems that that was a quote you particularly enjoyed. Could you comment on that? #01:06:37#

RP: Well, he said it so well, it is hard to say anything more about it. I think there is an element of that quote which of course encapsulates something about Degas and his wit but also the sharpness sometimes of his comments. I think in the former category of artists who don't know really how, he probably lumped a lot of artists (laughs) whose work he thought was quite amateurish, but they nevertheless seemed just so undaunted by how amateurish their work actually is. And, you know, I don't, I enjoy the comment, but I also think it's a bit mean in some ways. I think I've seen a number of art shows and artists' works and I sometimes do come away thinking about how Degas would have been just scowling, what terrible work this is, and yet it's almost a kind of zen thing – on the one hand, if you get so daunted by thinking, yes my work is just terrible, I don't know what I'm doing and it shows in the work I'm doing, well, you can just give it all up, you can get so distraught over it. But to continue working, you have to kind of surmount that somehow. And the irony I think is that every artist I know has had those feelings. You finish a painting and say "God, this is just terrible." But I would use as a counterweight to that comment I guess by Degas, there is another artist who sadly died a few years ago, who was very well-known throughout the United States, he was based here in the Boston area, Michael Mazur[6]. A remarkable artist, a terrific painter in oil and pastel and did amazing monotypes, and etchings, he was a very versatile artist, and he said something one time that I have never forgotten: "There is no such thing as a bad studio day. Because what you've learned on that day may come around to be something that will be useful on another day." And I love the positivity of that. And so even though some may say you don't know what you're doing, you can keep working because it is always a learning process. Although I think in some ways thinking about Degas quotes, my true favorite one is when somebody asked him about how he does his compositions, and he said: "Ah, the composition is like committing the perfect crime." (laughs) That's all he said in typically terse Degas fashion, but he is absolutely right because composition of a picture which is so critically important – if it works it's because it's not clear how it works, why it works for it to be successful. And so it is kind of like the perfect crime. #01:10:58#

IB: It's the mastery in a way, the mastery under which the effort is hidden, it is perfect because all the effort is submerged behind its surface, so to speak. #01:11:20#

RP: The are many times I've worked on a painting and realized it is not working right, just not working right and now after years I've learned the first thing you should think about is that maybe your composition is not right, the underpinnings, the very beginnings were not right. An artist I know used to love talking about how you then you should step back, take maybe some L-shaped pieces of matboard, corners of a mat, and then hold them up and start moving them around over your picture, and then you may, if you're lucky, find that – ah, that's the composition, that's much stronger! And he said then, if you find what that composition should have been, who's to say that you shouldn't then cut your paper down or even cut your canvas down so that you then achieve that shape, those relationships to create a more successful painting. And it's very freeing to think in those terms that you continue to have that opportunity to rethink what that basic starting point should have been. #01:12:50#

IB: Yes, I think that is a great thing to learn when you're becoming an artist and when you are engaging in art in a serious way, and I do think it is just so different when you are in conservation, because everything you do has to be absolutely correct, because you cannot easily retreat, you definitely cannot cut off any part of a painting #01:13:22#

RP: // (laughs) right #01:13:24#

IB: – although historically that has been done. So I think it's also very liberating to think that you still have so many options and that there is no bad day, #01:13:34#

RP: Right, yes #01:13:35#

IB: I think that is very wonderful. #01:13:38#

RP: It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? #01:13:40#

IB: Yes, right, it's very wonderful. And Roy, I think that might be a very good sort of closing of this recorded conversation to say that that's such a liberating and – with all the toils and the labor that goes into making art #01:13:59#

RP: //That's one of the things that in a funny way I've had to set aside from when I was a conservator, trying to think to be perfect about something. Because there is a kind of success which you're after. But if you're starting to think too much about perfection if can be debilitating, and it's also true that working for a while as a scientist can be – well – debilitating when it comes to trying to make art because there's a sort of, there are so many rules in science that you simply accept as valid, but it's not true in art. I mean, what are the rules, what are the rules for the artist? You are the creator, you're not bound by formulas or by the strictures of certain precepts of formulas or whatever. Another artist I had the privilege of working with for a little while, I'll never forget, he used to – while he was working on something or talking to you about making a painting – his favorite thing to say was: "Why not?" So simple. "Why not?" (laughs) #01:15:45#

IB: //Indeed, it opens a lot of new roads. #01:15:46#

RP: It opens everything, yes, and that's really thrilling. That's one of the things I like about making art. #01:15:56#

IB: Well, I think // #01:15:56#

RP: // Thank you! // #01:15:58#

IB: // The “why not” question is one that one can also mention to students of art because I think that starting off in creating art is an especially difficult thing. Once you have a bit of experience, like in many things, you gain a bit of confidence, and I think Degas’ comment was one in which he had already gained a lot of confidence to be able to say the things you were just quoting. #01:16:30#

RP: Right, yes. #01:16:32#

IB: I do think that we are going to end this recorded conversation here. I am thanking you very much again for this great conversation, inspiring conversation. And I will now press the button here, which is not to say that I’m going to disappear but I’m pressing the button right now. #01:16:55#

[1] Currently known as Prismacolor Premier® NuPastel.
[2] Produced by the Dutch firm Royal Talens as Rembrandt Soft Pastels (round sticks) and Rembrandt Carré Pastels (angular sticks).
[3] https://www.dakotapastels.com/files/pdfs/Hardness2020-Chart.pdf.
[4] https://frametek.com/
[5] https://www.khadi.com/where-to-buy/
[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Mazur